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SIERRA SAM'S SEVEN; or, The Stolen Bride.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "GILT-EDGED DICK," "BONANZA BILL," ETC., ETC.



STRETCHED OUT UPON THE GROUND, IN HIS OWN BLOOD, LAY THE BODY OF SIERRA SAM, ALL BUT . . . HEAD!

Sierra Sam's Seven; OR, THE STOLEN BRIDE.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS "ROSEBUD BOB" NOVELS, "SIERRA SAM" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"SIERRA SAM, YOU ARE WANTED."

RAMIRZ, a little Spanish settlement, not many dozens of miles from Tucson, Arizona, had in a measure caught "the fever," for gold had been found in and about the town in sufficient quantity to warrant sanguine hopes that "Rough Ranch," as the place was more familiarly known, would soon "kick the dust" in Leadville's face as a place of importance.

But there was a poor show for speculators, for the nabob of the town, Ramon de Ramirz, owned nearly all of the adjacent territory that was worth owning, thereby debarring strangers of a speculative turn from getting the vantage by which to make money.

Ramirz was a Spaniard, to all intents, although it was evident that some American blood coursed in his veins; and a goodly share of the people at the Ranch were of mixed descent.

There was a sprinkling of native Americans, however—rough, hard-working pilgrims, who jogged on at their every-day work, and counted it a picnic when there was any cause for excitement—for it was seldom that the slumberous little burg in the mouth of the four mountain gaps awoke to any particular excitement, except over an occasional fight, or a report of some adjacent road-agent raid.

The principal "fun"-producing place in Rough Ranch was the Casino, run by Joe Flanders, for there nearly all sorts of games of chance attracted the unwary, and the man who entered it with a full pocket was rarely called upon to carry it out again.

No hotel did Rough Ranch boast of, and what few passengers dropped off at the little mountain town were generally sent for and entertained by Ramon de Ramirz, provided they were of sufficient importance to warrant such an invitation. If they were not, they were left to look after their own accommodation.

It was in this way that the rich Don obtained a good deal of notoriety for his hospitality—for his board was furnished with the best luxuries afforded in that primitive region—and always had a servant awaiting the arrival of the stage, to conduct well-dressed and well-appearing parties to his handsome stone mansion.

When the Tucson stage rolled down into Rough Ranch one summer evening, just at sunset, and came to a halt in front of the post-office, two passengers alighted.

One was a young lady whose garments were covered by a gray duster, and whose face was partly screened from view by a white veil, which was arranged about her hat.

The man was a handsome, graceful fellow, clad in genteel garments, all except the broad-brimmed slouched sombrero upon his head, covering a wealth of dark brown hair which fell in a wavy mass upon his shoulders.

In face he was handsome, with a graceful mustache and imperial, piercing dark eyes, and a firm but pleasant mouth, denoting decided decision of character.

Few men of his type ever set foot in Rough Ranch; consequently, he became the target for many glances.

Sierra Sam was this new-comer—the well-known sleuth-hound and ferret of the Sierra Nevadas; and the young lady was she who had formerly been Angel of Big Vista, but now Sam's bride.

The interesting ceremony had taken place in Tucson the day before their arrival in Rough Ranch.

"Here we are at last," Sam said, as he assisted Stella to alight. "The next thing is to find a good hotel!"

"If you please, senor," a smooth-faced young Spanish-American said, "I have the honor, by orders from Don Ramon de Ramirz, to invite yourself and the senora to the hospitality of the mansion!"

"But is there no hotel?" Sam asked.

"There is no hotel, senor, and that is why the Den extends you the hospitality of his establishment," the servant replied.

"Then lead on!" and, offering his arm to Stella, they followed the servant up the main

street of the town, soon coming to the De Ramirz mansion.

It was a large, rambling, ancient sort of structure, built of stone from the surrounding mountains, and more resembled some old castilian castle than a modern residence. Turrets ran up at each corner, fronting the street, and were overrun by clinging ivy.

A broad, arched entrance led into the "court," or plaza, from which halls branched off in different directions, the floors being covered with bright rugs and the walls hung with pictures.

"Hello! I guess we have found a king's palace in the wilderness!" Sam remarked in a low tone to Stella as they were about entering.

"Ugh! I do not like the looks of the place, dear," the bride replied, with a shiver. "It reminds me of a grim old castle prison I once read of in an English novel."

"Pooh! You'll quickly get over your dislike, no doubt. As soon as I find what I want here, we will set out for the East, Providence permitting."

"But, Sammy, I fear some evil will befall us while we are in this town!"

"Oh! I guess not. I'll keep my weather-eye sharp open and look out for breakers."

They entered one of the great halls, and were thence conducted into a large, magnificently-furnished salon-parlor, where they were requested to be seated, and were asked for their cards.

Sam smiled at this.

In the social sphere in which he had for some time moved he had not needed cards, except a playing pack, so he drew an ace of hearts from his pocket and wrote upon the face of it—"Sierra Sam."

With a bow the servant received it and took his departure, while Sam and Stella devoted their attention to looking around.

Everything in the furnishings of the room was of rich, oriental style, and to import and bring to this far-away place must have cost a large fortune. Rare pictures, rich carpets, mats and draperies, fine pieces of statuary, exquisite ornaments and grand furniture all met the gaze—the light of a great lamp chandelier throwing a mellow radiance over all.

"This is too beautiful a place for a rambling spirit like me," Sam declared, with a low laugh. "I should feel out of place here."

"Oh! it is grand—just such a place as I would like to call my home!" Stella said, enthusiastically. "And yet it seems like a prison to me."

At this juncture a portly, dark-faced but not ill-looking man entered the room, and by his dress Sam judged that he was the Don.

"You are welcome, senor and senorita," he accosted the guests, advancing with a pleasant smile. "Americans are always welcome to the hospitality of Ramon de Ramirz. Newly wedded, eh?" and he glanced first from Sam to Stella.

"Yes—yesterday, at Tucson," Sam replied, rising and shaking the Don's proffered hand, "We thought we'd stop over a few stages in Ramirz, but did not know there was no hotel."

"It is my wish that there should be none, as it gives me a chance to extend my hospitality to all strangers coming here, which otherwise I should not feel so free to do. Now, while Ferro shows you to your room, I will order supper."

He rang a bell and the man-servant reappeared.

"Ferro, show the guests to the white chamber and be in waiting in the hall outside, to escort them to the supper-room, as soon as they have made their toilets," the Don commanded.

Ferro bowed and conducted Sam and Stella up a curious flight of stone stairs to the next floor; thence along a narrow, dimly-lighted corridor, to a room overlooking the street.

He admitted them to the room, the walls of which were hung with white satin, with furniture to match, and retired.

"What do you think of the Don?" Sam asked, when they were alone.

"Oh! I am afraid of him," Stella returned, with a shudder. "Although his exterior may seem pleasant enough, I believe he is for all a bold, bad man."

"You may, and you may not be right," Sam responded. "I am not favorably impressed with him, myself, although I have no cause to be suspicious."

Soon after they went down to supper with Ferro in the lead.

The dining-hall was more plainly furnished, except the table, which was set with silver and likewise with a most tempting repast.

The Don soon joined his guests, accompanied by a beautiful girl of some eighteen years, whom he introduced as "my daughter Inez."

She soon proved herself a most vivacious and charming conversationalist, and made herself and those in her company at ease, by her artless, charming manners.

Beauty of a rare type she possessed, both in face and figure, and she dressed in a style becoming her personal charms.

She at once made friends with Stella, and as soon as supper was over, the two went for a ramble through the queer mansion of the mountains, leaving Sierra Sam and the Don lingering at their wine and cigars.

"I believe I have heard of you," the Don was saying. "Let me see—you are a sort of detective, in your way: are you not?"

"Rather," Sam replied, with a laugh. "I knock about the country, picking up points and putting them to such use as I can."

"I presume, during your experience, you have occasionally looked in on games of chance, have you not? What say you? Shall we run over to the Casino and look on?"

"I have no objections," Sam responded; and accordingly they soon left the mansion.

Going down the rugged, shanty-lined street, until they came to the Casino saloon, they entered, to find themselves in such a scene as Sam had figured in many times before—a floor covered with chairs and tables, with a bar at one end of the room, and a collection of dirt-besplashed miners, better dressed gamblers and adventurers as acting figures in the scene.

A goodly portion of the professional gamblers present were Spanish-Americans; dark-faced and treacherous looking. Here and there, however, could be singled out a German, Yankee or Irishman, and in one instance, a negro and a Chinaman, the latter two being engaged in a game of poker, and the sable individual evidently getting the best of the game, judging by his huge guffaws.

As the Don and Sierra Sam entered, all eyes were turned upon them, for the dashing appearance of the ferret excited no little curiosity among the habitues of the place.

"This is the place where fortunes often change hands," the Don explained. "I've won and lost several here myself!"

"And have plenty to spare yet, I dare say," Sam observed.

"Well, no. I am by no means a millionaire, although not a beggar. I have enough for my current wants and no more. By the way, I see a party I wish to speak with privately, and I will leave you to yourself a few minutes."

He strode away then to another part of the room, where he engaged in conversation with a younger man, who was dusky-faced, had piercing black eyes, and hair, mustache and goatee to match.

Sam took a sharp look at him, so as to memorize him; then sauntered about the room, looking down on the various games that were going on.

At one table one gambler was throwing three-card monte, and Sam instantly perceived that he was an adept at the business.

The victim was a rugged, long-geared but good-natured Yankee, of past the middle age, who frequently gave vent to the cry "hoop-la!" which evidently was a favorite expression with him.

Sam stopped, and looked on with curiosity.

"There they are, gents," the gambler cried, dexterously flipping three new cards down upon the table, backs upward—"the aces of hearts, diamonds, and spades, respectively. The ace of hearts wins ten dollars! Buy your chips, and place 'em on your choice of two."

"Hoop-la! durn my skin ef I don't go ye another whirl," the Yankee responded, purchasing ten dollars' worth of chips, and covering one of the cards. "That's ther beauty, this time, sure sartin."

"Any one else want to make or lose a fortune?" the gambler demanded, his gaze wandering from face to face, and finally dwelling for an instant upon Sierra Sam's.

A miner soon put ten dollars upon a second card, and the gambler covered the other—which, of course, was the winning card, and he raked in the chips.

"Durn my luck! I'm bu'sted, by thunder!" Hoop-la cried, with a grimace. "Sixty dollars hev I lost, jest as simple as A, B, C, an' I ain't got even a dollar wherewithal to buy a drink of coffin-na' with."

"Any other gent got any confidence in the shrewness of their eyes?" Dandy Dell, the gambler, asked, with a sarcastic grin. "Watch me close now!"

And be dexterously threw the cards.

"Pretty flip at the game, I see," Sam said, advancing to the table.

"None better in the country than I," the gambler replied, boastingly.

"And yet you are very bad," Sam retorted. "I can pick out your ace of hearts, nine times out of ten, for money."

The gambler laughed scornfully.

"What do you want to bet?" he sneered, producing fresh cards.

"Anything that is agreeable to you," Sam replied, nonchalantly. "Say a thousand dollars."

"Humph! You must be flush. However, I'll go you!"

Once! He threw the cards. Sam picked up the ace of hearts, with a smile.

Nine times more, in quick succession, were the cards thrown, and as many times the ace of hearts was instantly picked up by the Californian.

"Your thousand dollars!" he said, when he had won. "Fork over!"

"I'll be cursed if I will!" the gambler replied, leaping to his feet, and drawing a revolver.

Just then, however, Don Ramon rushed up.

"Sierra Sam, you are wanted!" he cried, excitedly. "Your wife is missing!"

CHAPTER II.

SEARCHING.

SAM turned upon the Don, fiercely:

"What is this you tell me?" he demanded, sternly—"my wife is missing?"

"Ay, missing!" de Ramirz replied, wringing his hands in evident despair. "Come, quickly, to the mansion."

He turned and fled from the saloon, then, and Sierra Sam followed closely at his heels, and a large portion of the habitues of the saloon behind him.

When they arrived at the mansion, the Don and Sam alone entered, the former locking the others out.

In the parlor they found Inez de Ramirz in tears.

"Oh! Mr. Slocum!" she cried, hysterically, "I could not help it—indeed I could not!"

"What do you mean—explain yourself!" Sam demanded, sternly. "What do you mean—where is my wife?"

"I do not know—oh! I do not know, sir! I left your lady, for a moment, to come down-stairs for a glass of wine for her, as she said she felt faint, and on my return she was gone, from the blue chamber where I left her. I hastily called the servants and had the house searched, from top to bottom, but could find no trace of her. Oh! dear, what can I do—what can be done, toward finding her?"

Sam heard her through, patiently, his face whiter than usual, and his eyes emitting a wild, strange glance.

"Well, I do not see what more you can do, if all is as you say!" he replied, but if Stella left this mansion, some one, surely, would have seen her! I do not believe that she is outside of these walls," he declared with some heat.

"Sir, you speak as though you questioned my daughter's words!" de Ramirz cried, stepping quickly forward, in a white rage. "Apologize, or I'll throw you out of my house!"

"I'm afraid you'll find that rather a hard act to perform," Sam retorted, significantly. "As soon as I am allowed the privilege of examining your house, I shall be pleased to seek safer hospitality."

"Then you refuse to apologize?"

"Why, certainly! Sorry if I have hurt your daughter's feelings, but, you see it is a privilege among all detectives, to suspect whomsoever they please, regardless of personality."

"It is not your privilege to cast unjust imputations upon my daughter, and I tolerate no insult to me or mine. Ferro!"

The man-servant quickly appeared, in answer to the call.

"Ferro," the Don repeated, "show this man through the house. When you have satisfied him that his wife is not in the mansion, turn about and kick him out of it! Come, Inez, dear," and taking her by the arm, the Spaniard led the way into another room.

Sierra Sam laughed mockingly after them, and turned to Ferro.

"Lead on, my Christian friend," he said, grimly. "I will see what manifold secrets this hospitable resort has to disclose, and then, you can throw me out of doors, if you can."

"I do not propose to measure strength with a man of your evident caliber," Ferro replied, showing two rows of ivories, in a knowing grin. "The Don is hot in one minute and cool in another. He'll ask you to stay, before you go, no doubt."

They went up-stairs, and made a thorough examination of every room, hall and alcove, until every spot had been visited; but it was all without avail.

No trace of the Californian's missing bride could be found—nothing in the way of a clew, to give indication of her whereabouts, except that her wraps still remained in the white chamber, where she had taken them off.

"There is evidently nothing to be gained by searching here," Sam averred; "let us go below."

They went down-stairs, accordingly, and Sam looked through the lower rooms.

When he had finished his fruitless search and was about leaving the mansion, the Don strode out into the hall.

"Well?" he interrogated, gruffly.

"Well," Sam answered sternly, "I have found nothing of my wife, and shall hold you responsible for her loss. That you or your daughter must know something concerning her whereabouts seems but natural to me, and I will give you only a necessary length of time to find her. I am ready to be thrown out, sir!"

"Ferro! thrust that fellow into the street!" Ramirz roared, his rage increasing. "Say to the men of Rough Ranch that I have ordered them to mob him out of town."

Ferro grinned.

"I have no desire to die instantly, your honor," he declared. "The long-haired gentleman will go without being forced out, I know."

"Right you are!" Sam assented. "I will go, glad to get into a purer atmosphere than I think this place boasts of. Ramon de Ramirz, I command you to return me my bride! If you do not, I'll make this place accursed."

Then, as Ferro opened the door, the Californian passed into the street, where the larger share of the camp's population were gathered about in groups, discussing the current report that the wife of the long-haired, dashing stranger was missing.

No sooner did he appear, than he was besieged by this crowd of curious ones, and plied with inquiries in regard to the missing bride.

With his usual coolness, in spite of the painful circumstances, Sam related all that he knew about the matter, and rigidly questioned the rough audience, but no acknowledgment could be got out of them that they had seen anything of Stella, except at the time of the arrival of the stage.

Soon after, Joe Flanders, the proprietor of the Casino, called Sierra Sam to one side.

Flanders was an open-faced, keen-eyed fellow, of American parentage, whom every one knew only to respect, for his manly qualities were many.

Sam took a mental inventory of him in an instant, and made up his mind that he was a man who could be trusted.

"See here, stranger," Flanders said, when they were out of ear-shot, away from the crowd, "do you know what's what?"

"Well, it depends on what what you have reference to," Sam answered, with a smile.

"I mean, do you know that you have tumbled down here into a hornet's nest?"

"Well, I reckon I'm rather on to that conclusion," Sam confessed.

"I am glad of it. If you knew all that I know, you'd never have come here. I would that I could tell you more, but my lips are sealed by an oath, the breaking of which, would lose to me something I hold dearer than my own life."

"Ah! but you can tell me one thing which will be of service to me—is my wife within the camp?"

"She is not a thousand miles away," Flanders replied. "That is all I can tell you, more than to look out for yourself. Mistrust and distrust everything and everybody, or you'll find yourself in a bad fix. This to you simply as a friend."

Flanders turned and walked away, leaving Sam to his own reflections.

It was some time before Sam was able to form any plan of action, and in the mean time he wandered up and down the street in deep meditation, his face flushed with the indignation he could not help feeling at the loss of his bride.

He was positive that Ramirz was in some way connected with her disappearance, or at least knew something about it, and it was not often that a decided suspicion took possession of the Californian's mind which proved entirely groundless, so keen were his perceptions—so quick his judgment.

"If Ramirz is or is not guilty of complicity in this evident abduction, he is at least henceforth my enemy, and no doubt, judging by the

fellow's tell, who just put me on guard, an all-powerful personage among these dusky-skinned miners. Probably I could hardly gain the footing here that I got over in Big Vista."

He was pretty well satisfied that no amount of inquiry could elicit any information of Stella's whereabouts, and so he did not say much more on the subject to any one.

Rough Ranch was wide awake the better share of the night, midnight bringing no noticeable thinning in the people abroad; but Sam, with his ever watchful eyes, could not fail to notice one thing.

There was a Ramon de Ramirz element at work among them, and that element was embodied in the individuality of two persons—one, the man whom De Ramirz had talked with in the saloon; the other, the gambler, Dandy Dell.

With great industry did these parties go from person to person and engage them in conversation, and Sam guessed that they were arousing a feeling against him in the interest of Ramon de Ramirz.

"Let 'em go ahead!" he said, a resolute light in his eyes. "If they contemplate warring with Sam'l they may take just a step too far!"

The more he watched the movements of the two men the firmer became his conviction that his supposition was correct, for, after being talked to, the majority of the men turned anything but friendly glances toward the Californian.

"Wait till it comes handy for me to encounter that gambler," Sam muttered. "I'll show him some Sierra science."

The chance came sooner than he had expected, for Dandy Dell came sauntering along pompously toward where Sam was standing in front of the post-office, engaged in smoking a cigar.

Just as he came opposite, Sam stepped forward and confronted him.

"Hello! what the devil do you want?" the gambler demanded, savagely.

"Exactly one thousand dollars!" was Sam's peremptory answer. "I presume that, if you are a gentleman, when you make bets you pay them when you lose."

"If I like, I do—otherwise not. Get out of my way, you fool, or I'll mop the street with you!"

"I think not!" Sam cried, and the next instant his iron grasp was upon the card sharp.

Picking him up as though he were but a babe, Sam hurled him from him fully five feet through the air, when he fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

For several seconds he lay without a quiver, and a crowd quickly collected with threatening exclamations.

But Sam did not stir out of his tracks, except to put one foot forward and draw his revolvers!

CHAPTER III.

BANDEL.

He knew that the storm which had been gathering was about to burst, and hoped it would come at once and keep him from suspense, for he was in the spirit to meet it.

The gambler was picked up by some of his friends, but was too unconscious to stand, and was carried to his shanty some distance away.

The crowd, however, hovered near, and the black-mustached man with the goatee, with whom Sam had seen the Don conversing, soon approached the Californian, his dusky face by no means pleasant in its expression.

"So you are inclined to create a rumpus here, are you?" he demanded gruffly.

"Yes, when I perceive that there is a treacherous undercurrent working against me," Sam answered nothing daunted. "If you refer to the card cull, I have only to say it is a pity I didn't break his neck."

"Oh! you're independent, are you? Well, maybe you won't be quite so much so directly. Through Don Ramon's directions, I order you to leave this town and never set foot in it again, at the peril of your life!"

Sam laughed and surveyed his admonisher with a quizzical stare.

"Well, I must say you have a power of assurance," he declared. "What has Don Ramon or any one else to do with my staying here?"

"Ramon runs this town, and what he says you can bet is law among the men. So when he decides on a point, it always gets carried out."

"Well, you can just go over and lisp it gently in your master's ear that when Sierra Sam gets ready to leave Rough Ranch, he will do so, and not before; and, furthermore, say that I will come and go when it pleases me, regardless of

any blustering threats that he or his tools may make."

"We shall see about that. I'll turn Bandel loose on you as sure as my name's Frocard!"

And with a string of maledictions, the Spaniard strode away.

Who or what Bandel was, Sam of course had no way of knowing just then, nor did he care much.

He turned and went back to the Casino, a number of the crowd following him, evidently intending not to lose sight of him.

But Sam paid no attention to them whatever. Seating himself at a vacant table, he lit a cigar and busied himself in observing what was going on around him.

Shortly afterward a man burst into the saloon, which, the instant afterward, echoed with a roar that fairly made the windows shake and emanated from the new-comer's lusty pair of lungs.

Was this Bandel?

Sam concluded so, and knew from the moment that if such were the case, he had a desperate character to contend with, for the man was a very giant in size, armed to the teeth, and, more than all else, was a raving maniac!

One glance at his fiery eyes showed that.

"Hooray fer hornpipes an' huckleberry pies forever!" the giant roared, prancing around among the chairs and tables, the men being careful to make room for him. "Once more do I, King George, breathe the pure air o' freedom. Turned loose once more to slay one of my mortal foes, ere I am again remanded back to my gloomy dungeon. Where is he?—oh! let me gaze upon him, this milk-faced vampire I am to exterminate!"

He glared about him fiercely; his huge proportions, his passion-furrowed face, glaring eyes and disheveled hair all helped to make his appearance at once frightful and repulsive.

Fiercely his piercing gaze swept down over the sea of faces, until his eyes fell upon the Californian—then an expression of triumph lightened up his ugly countenance, and he strode forward.

"Hooray! Hyer's my little mouthful of humanity, I do declare!" he roared again, pausing and glaring down upon Sam with curiosity. "You're my calf to kill when ther prodile returns!"

"Well, old gent, what's out of kilter with you?" Sam asked, eying him narrowly. "Little off your circumstance this evenin', eh?"

"No, not this evenin'" the lunatic replied, with a malicious grin. "I am King George, of Great Britain, here in disguise of Bandel. I have been ordered by the Supreme Being to kill you, and I am going ter do it."

"Is that so?" Sam queried. "S'posin' I object?"

"Ohe! When I say die, it must be so," the giant replied, drawing a huge knife. "So get through with your prayers, and I'll lead ye out o' doors and cut yer throat so as to save spillin' yer blood here on the floor."

"Oh! that won't hurt. The boss of the shen-bang can easy mop up all you succeed in spilling!" Sam chuckled, "for I want you to understand, my noble galoot, that you can't touch one side of me, and if you're not very careful, I'll take your scalp and use it for a rug to wipe my feet on!"

A look of incredulous amazement swept over the maniac's face, showing that the words of the California cool-blade impressed him more strangely than anything he had heard in a long time.

"You!" he finally gasped, like one dazed.

"You bet; I!" Sam reassured; "I'm a living earthquake, an' the man who tries to get up a breeze with me most always gets badly used up."

"But, ye see, I'm King George, ther greatest king ther ever ruled a nation, an' I'm yer tenth exception. See!"

He grasped his knife and with a lightning movement leaped forward.

But, quick though he was, Sierra was quicker. Ducking his head, he darted like a flash between the giant's legs, when, raising quickly, he "spilled" him upon the ground in a heap; then turning, he shoved the muzzle of a cocked revolver in under Bandel's nose and held it there menacingly.

"Move an inch and I'll give you the contents!" he cried, sternly.

The maniac evidently thought so too. If crazy, he had enough sense to remain perfectly quiet, no doubt having as great a terror of grim death as any one else.

"Do you know what I've a notion to do with you, you big overgrown tool of Ramon de Ramirz?" he demanded.

"Kill me!" Bandel replied, with a sneer. "That's right. If you don't kill me when I'm down, I'll kill you when I get up!"

"I never take advantage of a man, when he is down!" Sam retorted; "so rise to your feet, and go your way in peace, remembering that I am your master, and you dare not harm me!"

He spoke in a tone and manner that were authoritative.

Bandel arose to his feet, but left his knife lying on the ground.

He wore a puzzled, hesitating air.

"Ha! ha! strange! strange I did not know you before. Why you are Nero—yes, Nero of old! Why I would not harm you for worlds!" he cried, wildly. "Nero! glorious Nero; no monarch to equal you. Give me your fist, and I am your friend forever!"

"Glad you have changed your tune," Sam said dryly, allowing the giant to grasp his hand, "as it saves me the necessity of furnishing the undertaker a job. Better run back now and let old Ramirz cage you, hadn't you?"

A cunning grin came upon the maniac's face.

"Maybe I should, my noble Nero, if I hadn't met you, but now, I say no! Two kings and monarchs shall we be, and no more dungeon fare will I see. I am free! free! free at last!"

The last words were roared forth in a stentorian voice that fairly made the house tremble, and brandishing a knife, the giant struck out for the door.

With alarmed cries a number of the Spanish-Americans, present, attempted to check him, but all to no purpose; in an instant, he was gone from the saloon.

A number of the crowd give chase—it seemed evident that they were afraid to allow the lunatic to escape.

Probably they also were tools and subjects of Ramirz, Sam reasoned.

"I'll bet I've struck a friend in the maniac, though," he muttered, "as long as his hallucination that I am Nero, continues. And if I mistake not a friend indeed is a friend needed in this hell-hole."

Attention was now turned from him, and he expected no immediate trouble.

So he procured several sheets of white paper and a marking pot from Flanders, and proceeded to paint some reward notices, which, when finished read as follows:

\$500 REWARD!

"To whom it may concern:

"My wife, Estelle Slocum, having been abducted by a party or parties unknown, (said abduction having taken place at the house of one Ramon de Ramirz) and believing that she is still within the limits of this camp, I will pay the above sum of money to the first person who shall give me positive information of her present whereabouts and the whereabouts of her abductor and captor.

"SIERRA SAM."

Then, procuring some tacks and a hammer, he went forth from the saloon, and posted the bills up in conspicuous places.

Passing the Ramirz mansion, a spirit of devilment caused him to pause, then he mounted the steps, and in a moment more had one of his notices tacked upon the front door!

The door suddenly opened, and Ramon de Ramirz appeared.

Sam laughed, and the Spaniard uttered an oath expressive—or meant to be—of his great astonishment.

"Well! What the devil do you mean by posting bills on my front door?" he demanded.

"Why, I had such a circus here, and you keep such a stock of wild beasts around you, that I thought it would be a good bill board!" Sam retorted. "Better read it and see if you can't profit by it." And he pointed to the sign.

Instead, Ramirz grappled with him, and as Sam was unprepared for such an act, they rolled down the steep steps, into the street, together.

Here, for the space of several moments, they rolled over and over, neither of them gaining the top; for the Don was a far stronger and more agile man than Sam had at first estimated him to be.

At last Sam gained the top, and it is doubtful what the result would have been, had not, at this instant, several of the Don's men, including Ferro, dashed up, and pounced upon Sam, overpowering and making him a captive in short order, although he struggled desperately to preserve his liberty!

CHAPTER IV.

A FOUND FRIEND.

Now that he was a prisoner, Sam was marched down the street, under close guard, the Don taking the lead quite pompously, despite

the fact that the skin had been pretty severely "barked" from his nose.

When the vicinity of the post-office was reached, a halt was made, and Sam was securely bound to a tree which grew by the side of the street.

The majority of the crowd then withdrew, out of earshot, and held a long consultation, in which oaths in a loud voice could occasionally be heard.

Finally they came surging back toward Sam—Ramirz, as before, in the lead.

But when they came to a halt, another man acted as spokesman in the Spaniard's place—an American he was, and less evil in appearance than the larger part of the population.

"But I can expect none the more mercy for that fact!" Sam argued to himself.

And he was right, as usual.

"Sierra Sam!" the man said, weighing his words carefully as he spoke them—"Sierra Sam, do you know that you are occupying a very unenviable position at present?"

"Yes, I'm aware that this tree and I were not made for one another," Sam responded.

"But you don't catch my meaning," persisted the spokesman. "I mean to impress upon your mind that you have, literally speaking, ventured into the jaws of death, and the jaws threaten to close on you."

"Well, let them close," retorted Sam, apparently in no way disconcerted by the frightful prospect. "I haven't been chewed up and swallowed by a whale in some time."

"See here! this is nonsense," Don Ramon cried, sternly, "and you may as well talk sanely. Your presence in this place is regarded by every one as an intrusion, and we wish to ask you as a body of citizens—will you peacefully take your departure and never return here again, if we give you your liberty?"

"No, I will not!" Sam responded promptly. "You'll find I'm a stayer, right from the old school. When you produce her whom you stole away from me—then I will be only too happy to bid you an affectionate and tearful adieu. But, until you do restore to me my wife, I'll make this town a place of terror in the annals of Western history—and don't you forget that!"

"We shall see about that," Ramirz declared gruffly. "If you will not go of your own accord, we will help you to go—and hear me swear it—if you ever return again, I'll give a thousand dollars to the man who shoots you down like a dog!"

Then turning to Ferro, he ordered:

"Bring the wild horse, Ferro!"

A murmur of something like horror ran through the crowd, as they heard the order, and comprehended the meaning.

Sam heard it, too, and was not at loss to comprehend.

He was to be hitched at the heels of an untamed horse, and in this manner dragged out of town, into the rough and rocky labyrinths of the mountains.

Little wonder that a chill crept down his spine, but he threw off what might have been to others a feeling of horror, by assuming a defiant glance.

"Yes, bring on your horse, if you like!" he cried, his tones defiant and ringing, "but do not fail to remember that henceforth the curse of Sierra Sam is upon this town, and for all time!"

"Your curse amounts to but little," Ramirz assured him, with a laugh.

"When you find yourself being trailed through the mountains, on your back, at a speed of twelve miles an hour, you'll mayhap begin to realize how insignificant a person you are!"

"And when, phenix-like, I rise from out of the cloud of dust left behind me, and prove that I can be equally as much a devil as it is my nature to be an honorable man—then tremble and ask who made Sierra Sam an 'avenger'!"

In a moment more, a dozen men approached, leading with great effort a powerful, fiery-spirited horse, which seemed to chafe greatly under confinement.

A strong rope, some thirty feet in length, was then tied to Sierra Sam's feet, and the other end of it noosed about the stallion's breast.

A fine specimen of the equine race was the animal, being of unusual size and graceful proportion, with a flowing mane and tail, and a haughtily poised head and flashing, fiery eyes.

His color was a jet black, and Sierra Sam seemed to be greatly surprised at sight of him, for he gave vent to a peculiar laugh.

"What's the matter?" Ramirz demanded,

angrily. "I should think you'd be praying, instead of laughing!"

"Maybe you'd like that privilege, too!" Sam retorted, with sarcasm. "As I happen to run my own business, I presume I shall alternate prayer and laughter at times to suit myself—not to please you. I was just wondering where you got hold of my horse!"

"Of your horse?" the Don ejaculated, in amazement.

"Why of course! I was forced to leave him, once, in the eastern part of this territory, and have never seen him since. To prove to you what I say, I'll speak to him, and then give you leave to start me off upon my journey. Ranger!"

He uttered the last word sharply, as he lay upon the ground—for he had been unfastened from the tree.

The horse pricked up its ears, and turned quickly around with a whinny, knocking down several of the men that were holding him.

The fiery eyes roved from face to face until they rested upon the prostrate Californian—then an expression of almost human intelligence became visible upon the wild steed's face.

Another whinny of recognition escaped the horse; no one who gazed upon the man and the brute could doubt that Sierra Sam had found a friend among strangers.

"Ranger!" he called again, and the sagacious animal, with a glad whinny, walked forward and smelled of the captive ferret, licking his clothing as a dog might have done.

"That's all, gentlemen!" Sam said, to the astonished crowd. "I have found a friend among a corral of wolves, and your ruffianly plan is frustrated. If you want to kill me now, I'll guarantee this noble brute will avenge me!"

"We'll see about that!" Ramirz gritted, a devilish gleam entering his eyes, as he drew a knife.

"Ranger! Quick!" yelled Sam, and with a sudden movement the animal wheeled around like a top, biting and kicking in every direction.

Ramirz got a kick in the stomach that doubled him up like a jackknife, and several others got severely bit or kicked, all in the space of a minute.

Those lucky enough to escape, were not slow in getting at a safe distance from the infuriated horse.

While the crowd stood gaping and irresolute, Sam managed to get upon his feet and then clambered upon the back of the steed.

In another instant, at his command, the horse was dashing furiously up the gulch street.

Turning so that he could look back, the daring Californian cried:

"Beware! The curse of Sierra Sam rests upon Rough Ranch! When I come it shall be to introduce death into your midst, until you give me up my bride!"

A moment more and a bend in the gulch hid him from view.

Weeks went by.

Rough Ranch now waxed famous, because new and valuable gold mines had been unearthed, which Ramon de Ramirz did not own or control, but which hard working miners had located and staked out for themselves.

This discovery called in a new class of people peculiar to the average mining settlement, such as speculators, thieves, gamblers and knaves at large, who lived by their wits, in preference to doing manual labor.

In fact, Rough Ranch grew and prospered. What sin, crime or like similar excitement could not be found therein, was not worth speaking of, and the citizens of the booming mountain town looked down on its smaller sister camps with great contempt.

Now that the influx was largely composed of sturdy Americans, Ramon de Ramirz became day by day a person of less importance and of less influence, which was galling to him, in the extreme.

And not to him alone, but to those of his Spanish subjects, who upheld him.

To have the Yankee element take control of the town and run things pretty much to suit themselves, was altogether against his inclinations and wishes.

One night Ramirz and a dashing young Spaniard, named Carlos Meiro, sat in the Don's private parlor, engaged in smoking and drinking, when the topic of conversation turned upon the power which the Yankees were gaining in the place.

"They have already fairly obtained control of the camp, and we have little or nothing to say in our own town," Carlos said, candidly.

"I am not dead to the fact," Don Ramon replied, his dusky face assuming an ugly scowl. "The influx of miners has wrought the change, and weakened my power. They're already two to our one, and more coming by every stage. It is but a matter of a short time when they will have entire control of everything in Rough Ranch."

"Even steal your own mines from you!" Carlos sneered. "And are you going to stand this, Don Ramon?"

"How am I going to hinder it, or help myself? The Yanks outnumber my friends two to one, and are a rough and lawless gang!"

"Nevertheless, there is a way," the younger villain declared, "by which you can regain your former power and prestige. Listen, and I will tell you."

He bent forward and spoke long and earnestly, while the Don listened with great eagerness, showing often, by the expression of his countenance, that he favored Meiro's argument.

When the man had concluded, the Don said:

"Your scheme might work well, I believe, and if it did, would surely be of benefit to me. You say you have all the men picked out?"

"I have."

"And for the sake of re-establishing me as ruling spirit in Rough Ranch you will prosecute this proceeding?"

Carlos grinned sarcastically.

"Oh! certainly—on conditions!" he responded, with a chuckle. "On certain conditions!"

"Humph! what are they?"

"I'll tell you. I have heard it said that you hold possession of one most beautiful woman—the same whom Sierra Sam lost while here. If you will give me that woman as my wife, I will do all that I have proposed to you."

"Bah! what puts such foolish ideas in your head, Carlos? I know nothing whatever of Sierra Sam's lost bride, nor do I want to. As nothing has been heard from him lately, I presume he has found her and cleared out."

"Don't be too sanguine on that score. He may drop in on you at any time. As for the woman, I am not yet convinced but what you have her secreted somewhere."

"Think whatever you choose—I know best. There is my daughter, Inez, too, whom you have been paying attentions to. Better look sharp lest she becomes jealous and lets her passion get the best of her. She is a fury then."

Carlos laughed.

"Fear not. We are not lovers," he said. "Your amiable daughter has gone off a-loving a far handsomer man than I."

"Who?" the Don demanded, quickly.

"Sierra Sam, I believe!" was Meiro's laconic answer.

"The devil! I'll see to that! She must be crazy."

"Not a bit of it. She knows her business. But how about the other matter? Give me my price, and the good work shall begin."

"Should I be able to get hold of the girl, I'll give her to you, but cannot do so when I know nothing about her."

"Well, I suppose I shall have to take your word for it. So I will have proceedings begun, whereby you will resume your 'boss-ship' of Rough Ranch."

"Do so, and you shall not lose by it, I promise you," Don Ramon asseverated, soon after which Carlos Meiro, or Black Carlos, as he was more familiarly known, took his departure.

A compact had been made that opened up one of the greatest wrongs against one man that western annals of crime ever recorded.

The next morning when the people of Rough Ranch awakened, they found a most startling notice posted against the sides of several houses.

It ran as follows:

NOTICE:

"Beneath this announcement, on the ground, lies one dead man, being the initial fruits of Sierra Sam's vengeance against Rough Ranch and its citizens. The reign of terror has just begun. Sierra Sam came to your place a stranger, and you turned upon him and stole his bride. Some one of you is guilty—look among yourselves and find out! Restore the lost bride, and the reign of terror shall cease. Otherwise, I'll turn all Rough Ranch into a graveyard!"

"SIERRA SAM!"

In each instance, where a placard had been posted, a man lay near by, upon the ground, stark and stiff in death!

Was it the beginning of the end?

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN FROM YUMA AND HIS LITTLE PARD.

LITTLE wonder that Rough Ranch was in a red-hot condition the next few days, after the terrible warning.

Day and night almost, groups of men stood about the street, in consultation; purses were raised and rewards offered for the capture of the vengeful son of the Sierras, whose wrath was declared against the citizens of the mountain metropolis, and on two more occasions was a dead man found upon the street.

A band of Vigilantes were organized in secrecy, and posted in various parts of the camp to keep up a watch incessant, and every newcomer, whether he came in on foot, horseback or on stage, was given a rigid examination, lest he be the dread avenger in disguise.

One morning Joe Breck, the sturdy, keen-eyed chief of the Vigilantes was found dead in front of the Casino, where he had been seen the night before, in full health and spirits.

It was literally the last straw which broke the camel's back, and the people fairly howled their indignation.

The street swarmed with the excited populace, and terrible maledictions hurled against the name of Sam Slocum.

Breck had been stabbed in the back.

Some one was wanted to fill his place, and a conference was held among the principal citizens to determine upon another.

While the discussion was in progress, a well-built but dirty, shabbily-dressed pilgrim crowded forward—a man with a dusky countenance, the better share of which was covered with a jetty black beard and hair.

He wore a greasy, slouch hat; his revolvers were beauties in point of size and finish; when he spoke his voice was like a roll of thunder.

"Hello! I say hyar, gents—I'm yer huckleberry fer ter fill Breck's place, ef ye want a man what's sharper than the blow-end uv a razzer, stronger than old Hercules, braver than ther roarin'est lion uv Asia. Did yer ever hear of Jake Yuma, boyees?"

Had they?

These excited pilgrims of Rough Ranch rather thought they had.

A fame, throughout that part of Arizona, had Yuma, like unto Geo. Washington, from the fact that he was credited with having pitched into and killed some twenty members of old Miguel's outlaw gang, once upon a time, and still lived to tell of the wonderful exploit.

So that many curious glances were leveled upon the man from Yuma, whose prowess was so confessed; but he laughed in his deep, thunderous tones.

"Don't git skeart acuse Iworsted them pas-sal o' road-agents, up nor', 'ca'se I'm jest as calm as a Car'lin kewcumber now, an' wouldn't hurt ye for a ten-cent drink o' blue vitriol. I drapt down here tew lay in a new stock o' pro-vender fer a prospectin' trip, an' heerin' o' the defickelty ther town has got into, l thort mebbe I might be o' some service!"

"Well, boyes, what d'ye think about it?" Joe Flanders asked, looking the crowd over inquiringly. "Ye've nigh about all heerd tell about Jake Yuma. Ef ye want a fust-class fighter and a man who'll die game wi' his boots on, jest say so."

"Does the man understand the case?" a prominent miner inquired, who had lost a brother in one of the recent visitations of the avenger.

"Reckon I've got et all down, pat as pat can be," Yuma replied, with a nod. "Ter begin with, ye drove a galoot named Sierra Sam from yer town, an' he swore vengeance—ain't that so?"

"Correct," Flanders assented, "though et war Ramirz who instigated the movement."

"Perzactly!" nodded Yuma. "Don Ramirz bossed the town then, an' aire losin' ground since ye're fillin' in wi' Yanks. Might be possible thet through his agency ye're gittin' all this blumbago an'-steel taffy, while yer Sierra Sam is gittin' all ther credit fer et. Nevertheless, ef ye want ter collectively gather inter yer net the chap Sam'l, why I'll jest tell ye what I'll do. I'll take er trial of ten days, an' ef I don't fetch ther galoot ter Liner, ve ken jest lay my thrut across ther handiest an' chop my purty pericranium off!"

"Fair enough, that!" assented Flanders.

"What d'ye say, boys?"

The majority of the crowd signified their approval, and Yuma was forthwith declared chief of the Vigilantes.

"Now, then, I'll pick out my own men!" he said, "jest as I happen ter cum across sum feller w'ot I jedge ter be sharp. Jest hold yer hoses, though, an' I'll show ye my gal, Sal Slick. She's a hull host in herself!"

He took a wooden whistle from his pocket and blew a shrill blast.

A moment later a scrawny, dwarfed mule

came trotting down the street, upon whose back sat a young girl—a mere child of some seven years, who was dressed in boy costume from boots to sombrero.

About as pert a looking miss was she as is often encountered, her face being saucily pretty, with a roguish mouth, dancing brown eyes, and the whole partly framed by a wealth of curling brown hair.

In figure she was petite, yet graceful, and was altogether a most attractive child.

"Hello! Whoa, Thunderbolt!" she cried, as she espied Yuma. "What's the racket, daddy?"

"Bizness, Sal—bizness!" Yuma answered, advancing. "Make ye 'quaint wi' ther representative citizens o' Rough Ranch, wi' whom we've got a dicker. I've jest tuck ther job o' capterin' a cutthroat who's named Sierra Sam, an' ef I don't succeed wi'in ten days ye'll be left an orphint, 'case I've went my head on ther ginerale result."

"Bully boy, daddy! Jest count on Little Sal ter lend ye a lift. But, I say, who is goin' ter provide ther chuck? I'm as hungry as a b'ar w'ot can't eat."

"Well, come along to the Casino, and I'll do the agreeable," Flanders said. "Probably you wouldn't like Ramirz's hospitality?"

"Waal, I should snort negatively, you bet!" Yuma replied, with a shrug, which pretty plainly expressed his opinion of the Don and his place.

From that hour Yuma and his child became prime favorites among the Yankee element of Rough Ranch.

Sally may have been a just cause of part of this liking, for she was always as pleasant as a streak of sunshine, pert and saucy, and at the same time apparently able to take care of herself.

Yuma, after his first introduction gradually became more staid, and had less to say, although he occasionally allowed his outlandish peculiarities to have enough scope to show that by nature he was somewhat of a wag.

While he studied those with whom he came in contact, narrowly, he was also studied by the people, who somehow did not seem to have as full confidence in him as they should, considering his position.

This was perhaps in a measure owing to the fact that a powerful opponent was cautiously working against him, in the person of Carlos Meiro.

Supplied with large amounts of money, by Ramon de Ramirz, the crafty young Spaniard was spending freely among all classes, he himself the while simulating to be on a "bu'st" to use a familiar phrase.

But to a close observer, it would have become at once apparent that his semi-intoxication was all put on, and that his sole purpose of extravagance was to draw over to the Ramirz side, the major part of the population.

There was one man, however, who was thoroughly alive to the work that was going on, and that person was Jake Yuma.

His keen observing eyes let not one important action escape their notice, and it may be safe to add that few minor items there were that did not come in under his surveillance or that of his right bower, Sally Slick.

As fully acute of ear and eye as her black-bearded parent, was Sally, and when her merry eyes became set upon a person, it was with a reading power that was irresistible.

Even while studiously scrutinizing a person, she was as bright, piquant and saucy as one well could be, and won many friends.

She too had discovered the fact that Carlos Meiro was feeding the men on money, as well as whisky, and as soon as she got an opportunity she called Yuma's attention to the fact.

"Phew! you're slow!" the man grunted, puffing away at his griny pipe. "I discovered it long ago."

"What d'y'e savvy, then, daddy?"

"Oh! thar's mischief, on course; but, jest kee' yer eyes open an' yer tater-trap shet, an' i reckon we'll come ter some conclusion, by and by."

During the evening, as he was lounging in the Casino, the Spanish-American, Meiro, approached Yuma.

"Hello, old pard," he hailed, with an assumed stagger, and drunken accent. "Come up an' have suthin'?"

"No, thank you; just imbibed a bootleg of blue vitriol, which warms up my inner man sufficient for the present!" Yuma responded, gruffly. "When I drink, I pay!"

"Oh! so you're a high-toned galoot, aire ye!" Meiro demanded, flushing.

"Very!" Yuma returned, with a yawn; "so high-toned in fact, that I cannot be bought over with money or whisky, bet yer boots!"

Black Carlos uttered a curse.

"Look out that you don't go a step too far with your insolence!" he gritted, fiercely, "or I shall call you to account!"

And as if to emphasize his threat, he laid his hand upon the hilt of a sheath-knife he usually carried.

Yuma laughed, scornfully.

"You needn't take any more slack than you like, I'm sure," he remarked, in his dry way.

"If you feel like getting hurt, I can accommodate you any time. You are a sneaking puppy, and the sooner you're utilized as a street mop the sooner you'll be settled gracefully into your rightful position!"

The Spaniard's face fairly flamed with rage, and he jerked his long knife from the scabbard, with the evident intention of running the man from Yuma through with it, but out of the Arizonian's coat sleeve into his hand dropped a cocked revolver, and came to a bearing over the villain's heart.

"Jest kinder look out, will ye!" Yuma remarked, in soft, persuasive tones. "I'm allus at home when visitors call!"

"Put up your pistol and get a knife and I'll soon show you whether you are or not!" Black Carlos hissed. "You've insulted me, and your life shall pay for it!"

"Korrect, but ye see I don't fight wi' swords. Ef ye want ter bang off yer wrath with pistols, thar's my gal Slick Sal—she'll accommodate ye on my account!"

"Oh! so ye try to saddle it off on the child, do ye? But that won't do; you're an infernal coward and craven, and you've got to fight me!"

Yuma uttered a deep roar and, with movement of astonishing celerity, leaped upon Black Carlos ere that ruffian could use his knife, and bore him to the floor, heavily.

Tearing away the ugly blade, the Arizonian seized the hapless Spaniard by the long hair of his head, and dragged him from the saloon into the street, where he jerked him into a mud puddle.

"Now, sir!" he roared, "the next time you or any other man calls Jake Yuma a coward, you'll get something besides mud to swallow, bet yer boots!"

The crowd which had followed gave a rousing cheer, and Black Carlos slowly arose from his dirty bath.

For a moment he glared his inexpressible wrath at the man from Yuma—then, turning on his heel, strode away toward the Ramirz mansion.

While Yuma chuckled softly:

"That's the way I serve them as think they're better nor all other earthly galoots!" he said. "One dose generally proves sufficient to let 'em know that Jake Yuma's tew hum, once in a while."

Sally Slick met Miss Inez de Ramirz the next day.

With independent freedom Sally was sauntering about the town, munching peanuts, and curiously eying every one she met, when she chanced to encounter the Senorita Inez, near the latter's residence.

The beauty was elegantly dressed and moved along with majestic grandeur—at least, so it struck Slick Sal, who stared hard at her.

And, as neither offered to turn out, as a consequence both were forced to come to a halt to avoid a collision.

"What do you mean?" Miss De Ramirz demanded, haughtily. "Why do you not turn out?"

"Just what I was goin' ter ask you," Sal replied, with cool impudence. "You orter turn out when you meet a lady!"

The senorita grew red.

"Indeed! your insolence is unpardonable. Who are you, pray?"

"Slick Sal, right bower of Jake Yuma, and a trump gal, you bet!" Sal replied, promptly, putting her arms akimbo. "Spect you're old Ramirz's gal, not?"

"I am the Senorita Inez, if it pleases you to know—so please step aside and allow me to pass," Miss Impudence!

"Can't see the pint, sis!" was the independent retort. "Age before beauty, ye know—so you give in, half-way, an' I'm willin' ter go ye half, too!"

"Mercy! I never was so insulted in my life. I command you to step aside, child, or I shall chastise you with my parasol!"

"Don't ye try it, or I'll scratch yer eyes out,

and pull all them bangs out of your head!" Sally cried, resolutely. "I offered fair, and I'll fight before I'll be crowded on, you bet!"

"Dear! dear! I shall have to call for my father!" Miss De Ramirz gasped, white with passion.

"I'll double dare you to!" Sal rejoined. "If that old cove pokes his nose outside the door, I'll shoot it off, as sure as preachin'!"

The senorita uttered a Spanish oath, so great was her rage, and sprung toward her youthful tormentor, at the same time drawing a silver mounted stiletto from her dress.

But, ere she could use it, a rifle shot rung out, and a whizzing bullet struck the glittering instrument of death, and tore it from her grasp!

CHAPTER VI.

A LETTER FROM SAM'L.

WHO had fired the shot that had struck Miss De Ramirz's stiletto no one seemed to know; a crowd gathered, immediately, at the head of whom loomed up old Jake Yuma and Ramon de Ramirz.

"What is the matter here? Did you dare to fire at my daughter?" the Don roared, glaring fiercely at Sally Slick.

"No, she didn't!" Yuma cried, pushing him aside. "My gal knows her biz, you bet, an' hyar's what'll back her. How is it, Sal?"

"Jest like this; I met this highfalutin' hornet on ther street heer, an' as I see she wasn't agoin' ter turn out, I didn't nuther, and as a natteral consequence we had ter halt. I offered to see her half, but she wouldn't budge, an' drawed the stiletto on me, w'ot ye see lyin' on the ground, yonder. Jest then along come a bullet, zip! and knocked it out of her hand quicker'n flash!"

"Is this true, dear?" Ramirz asked, turning to Inez.

She nodded, but did not speak. Her face was ashen white.

"My daughter was right, and it is lucky for you that you attempted to do her no harm!" the Don declared, speaking to Sally. "The next time you meet a lady on the street, especially my daughter, you had best be polite. Come, Inez, dear, let's get out of this street rabble!"

"See heer, old Ramrod!" Sal cried, with sudden childish ferocity, as she stepped in front of him, and shook her clenched little fist at him; "jest you lookee heer. I won't budge only jest half-way fer any man or woman, no matter ef it's Queen Vic. or old Ulysses, and if that gal o' yours ever tries to crowd on Slick Sal again, she'll get every bang snatched out of her head! You hear me!"

The crowd cheered, vociferously, at this, and De Ramirz's face fairly flamed with rage, as he led his daughter up the steps and entered his own mansion.

In the salon-parlor, they found Black Carlos placidly engaged in cigarette smoking.

"Hello! what's wrong?" the younger rascal asked, noting the Don's savage aspect, and the senorita's paleness.

The Don quickly explained, interlarding the explanation with plenty of Spanish oaths.

Carlos laughed, when he had heard the explanation through.

"Well, you see what things are coming to, don't you?" he said. "First you know, through this new man, Yuma's instrumentality, they'll be telling you to pack up your duds and puck-achee. There's only one thing to be done, and I think you will agree with me: The screws must be put on harder!"

"You are right!" the Don growled; "it must be done at once. And, that is not all—the devilish black-whiskered ruffian who calls himself Yuma, must be removed."

"It can be easily done, providing you choose to help in the job. I am not prone to tackling men of his caliber alone hereafter."

"You are cowardly!"

"You are wrong. I know no fear, but the man Yuma is something extraordinary, in the matter of strength and skill. I'll guarantee there's no one man in Rough Ranch who can successfully tackle him, when he's on his guard, which he always appears to be."

"Perhaps you're right; at any rate he's a dangerous opponent to my interests—that's evident, and must be put out of the way, even if I have to help do it. When would be the best time to move against him?"

"At night—to-night, if I can learn where he hangs out, or, if not to-night, the first other night we get a favorable opportunity. I'll keep watch, and in the mean time, I'll work up something for the gossipers to talk about again."

That night when the shadows were at their darkest, the nocturnal bill-posters must have been abroad, for the next morning posters stared at Rough Ranch pedestrians from many a conspicuous place.

Of these placards there were two varieties, which had evidently been placed in position by two different parties.

One ran thus:

To the People of Rough Ranch:

"It having come to my hearing that a series of ghastly crimes are being committed in and about your camp, against innocent persons, and placards have been posted, purporting to be from me, and assuming that I have maliciously committed said crimes, I take this method of emphatically denying the charge. Although I swore vengeance against you all, I have not, until now, perfected any arrangements for the consummation of that vengeance. Now, however, I have rallied around me six trusty fellows, and you shall henceforth know us as Sierra Sam's Seven. No murder shall we do—no killing unless forced so to do in self-defense. But 'bleed' you, one and all, shall we, at every opportunity, until you as a people, shall find my lost bride, whom I have every reason to believe has not been taken out of Rough Ranch. When you shall find her who never gave you offense, and restore her to me all will be well. This may not be exactly right to 'bleed' you all, some of you may say, but it is the only way I have of enforcing justice. Find my bride, who is secreted by some person or persons, unknown, in your midst—then shall Sierra Sam's Seven be unknown forever after. But, until such time as you do find her, and restore her to me, I swear that you shall all pay me a liberal tax or toll, when least you expect it, trusting that the depletion of your respective purses will spur you to search for Sierra Sam's missing bride. But, remember one thing: look in your own midst for murderers, for you'll find 'em not among the 'Seven.'

"Search where ye may, by night or day,
From your velvet grip we'll keep away."

"With due respects, &c.,
SIERRA SAM!"

That was what some placards had to offer for the edification of the open-mouthed citizens of Rough Ranch that morning.

But, this was not the worst.

In five places were different notices posted, beneath each of which a dead man was found upon the ground!

And these notices read:

"Revenge! sweet revenge. As a people ye drove Sierra Sam from ye, after stealing his bride, and he cursed ye. Behold! the fruits of your action are cropping out. Fly! fly! for none of ye shall escape! I'll make of Rough Ranch a graveyard wherein to bury you! Ha! ha! Beware! S. S."

Here was another pretty little souvenir for the denizens of the young metropolis to read and ponder over.

Needless to say both of the notices created tremendous excitement, to say nothing of the frightful massacre.

The five men who had been stricken down were all recent arrivals except one, who was a brother of Joe Flanders, of the Casino.

After having the body removed to his shanty Flanders sought out old Yuma, and found that worthy and the bullwhacker, Hoop-la, engaged in reading the notice concerning the organized Sierra Sam's Seven.

"Well?" Flanders said, his face white because his terrible emotion was held in check; "what do you think of the situation?"

Yuma scowled.

"It looks just as I hinted, don't et," he grunted, "when I jined ye? Sierra Sam hain't got nothin' ter do wi' this butcherin' business; right hyar's his prospectus."

"I've read it; also found my brother Tom dead. Now, this thing has got to be investigated, I say, and the town's with me. You've tuk the job, and you're looked to to stir around."

"Humph! Look out that you don't get too fast, as you did in Sierra Sam's case!" was the reply of the Arizonian. "If I don't come to time in ten days, you know what I told you."

"But the whole town may be massacred in that time!"

"Oh! I guess not. I have no fears on that score. I'll tell you what's what, though; the sooner you arouse an indignation meeting, and clean every bit of Spanish blood out of the town, the surer you'll be not to have so many dead men lying around loose!"

"Ah! then you think that Ramirz is at the head of the matter, do you?" Flanders queried. "Most assuredly I do. About as nigh as I kin jedge, Ramirz don't like it because the Yankee element aire gittin' so strong hyarabouts, an' he can't be boss. Looks like ter me as ef he warn't too good fer ter do enny crime—he an' that Spaniard Meiro—that would help him ter run this town."

"Maybe not!" Flanders said, reflectively, as he walked away.

"I've set him to thinking, at least, whether it does any good or not," Yuma muttered, also moving off toward the Casino. "Almost believe I have planted the kernel whar it'll grow into a cornfield."

The day passed rather wildly monotonous. Everywhere was every person excited to a great pitch, and it was lucky that the perpetrators of the murders, whoever they might chance to be, were not around, for lynching would surely have been their fate.

There was not a little comment disparaging to the Arizonian, Jake Yuma, because he did not, to use one miner's words, "make more of a splash" toward sifting the matter through to the bottom.

On several occasions the remarks became of such a bitter character that violence was threatened against him.

But it did not come to pass.

Perhaps this was partly owing to the fact that Sally Slick was constantly here, there and everywhere among the men, chatting, sassing and as merry as a lark, precluding all possibility of any one disliking her for any great length of time.

So that on her account might have been attributed the fact that no outbreak occurred against Yuma, who kept himself pretty well indoors, at the Casino, with his grimy pipe as his chief solace.

The veteran borderman, Hoop-la, was, the while, not far away, a sort of friendly intimacy seemingly having sprung up between them.

Yuma was in no wise ignorant of the feeling against him among the major part of the citizens, for Sally kept him advised, and he received the reports with stolid indifference.

Finally he suddenly seemed to change his tactics.

Going to the bar, he ordered a quart bottle of bug-juice and a glass, then sat down at a table and proceeded to get outside of it in the most approved manner, apparently, but, in reality, all but a couple of glasses went into his boot-legs, a sleight of hand operation which he performed so cleverly that but one man noticed the cheat.

That man was Joe Flanders, of the Casino, and he watched the Arizonian covertly and with no little curiosity.

As soon as Yuma had apparently dispatched the contents of the bottle he gave vent to a deep bellow, stepped away from the table and zig-zagged toward the door.

"Hip! hip! hooray!" he cried, in a tipsy way. "Three chairs for the bar jangled spanner! The eperlibum unis, ferever! Hooray fer bed, by thunder!"

Many strange glances were turned after him as he staggered down the street, and several fierce miners made a move toward stopping him, but were checked by their companions.

"Let him go and sleep off his load," the peacemakers said. "No wonder ther galoot went an' got drunk. Thar's bin so much talk ag'in' him."

This also checked the others, and Yuma was allowed to go his way unmolested.

Not far was it across the gulch to where a sort of hut-shanty had been erected against the towering wall of mountain rock, when Rough Ranch first sprung into existence, but, as it was not tenable in rainy weather, Yuma was the only one who had lately occupied it.

Hither he went now, and the gaze of many pairs of eyes followed him until he was out of sight—particularly that of Carlos Meiro.

"So that's his cage, is it?" he muttered, glancing at the sky and perceiving that it was about sunset. "He will sleep well to-night, and there will be no danger in paying him a visit. I must notify the Don, and at the same time not forget to draw on him for another thousand. I am getting fat out of working him. Ha! ha! a thousand a day to buy these bum miners over with, when in reality I don't waste over fifty on 'em. It's a soft snap, surely."

He went at once to the Ramirz mansion, and found the Don just in the act of finishing a bottle of wine.

"Well, what news, Carlos?" was his gruff query.

"Good news, you can bet!" the scoundrel said, with a chuckle. "The game from Arizona, north, is packed away snugly in his cage, sound asleep, and with his boiler full of bug-juice. So be ready at two P. M. to-night, and there'll be another opportunity for the undertaker to-morrow. Come well armed, and be careful lest some accident should betray your identity!"

When darkness had enveloped Rough Ranch once more in its somber shroud, and muttering thunder around the horizon added to the aspect of night, together with drizzling rain, a man skulked along the deserted street until he came to the post-office.

Enveloped in a long oil-cloth coat was he, with a full mask of the same material over his face, and a slouch black hat upon his head.

Cautiously unlocking a front door, he entered, and was gone several minutes.

When he returned, he gave vent to a low laugh:

"So far, so good!" he muttered. "Now then, I must pay the fair Inez a visit."

So saying, he stole toward the De Ramirz mansion.

CHAPTER VII.

A MIDNIGHT VISIT.

The Ramirz mansion was wrapped in gloom, when the masked stranger reached it. He stood across the street studying the front of the building through the holes in his mask.

"No chance to effect an entrance, by the front," he finally muttered, crossing the street. "Here's an alley, however that runs to the rear of the place. May be there's some show there."

On threading the dark alley, however, and reaching the back side of the mansion, he found that there was hardly any better chance of gaining access than in front.

In the second story, however, was a window drawn down from the top; so looking about in the neighboring sheds, he was not long in finding a ladder, which he placed against the side of the building, and was soon up to the open window.

He at once saw that the room was a lady's bed-chamber, but the bed was unoccupied, though it had evidently been slept in but a short time previous.

He also saw something of a very different nature, which gave him a start.

Confronting him, wrapped in her night-robe, stood the Senorita Inez, a pair of formidable cocked revolvers in her grasp, the deadly tubes of which pointed directly at Sierra Sam—for it was he who had climbed to the opened window.

"You are my prisoner!" the Don's daughter said, quickly and positively. "Stir but an inch, and you shall realize that I am a dead shot!"

"Indeed!" Sam observed, rather gruffly. "Just at present you do seem to have the drop on me. But, I know you wouldn't shoot me!"

"Just stir, and see!" Miss de Ramirz snapped, decidedly. "I know who you are, and I'd just as lief earn a few hundred dollars reward as not. So climb in here, and make me a visit, or I'll tumble you from that ladder to the ground, in a hurry."

"In that case, I guess I'll have to accommodate you," Sam replied, vaulting through the opening into the room, "although I generally make my calls upon ladies, by day."

"That don't matter," the senorita replied, with great coolness. "It cannot matter much, since, under the circumstances, you must henceforth be my husband."

"Your husband?" Sam echoed, in great amazement, as he removed his mask and seated himself, his handsome face showing indistinctly in the dim lamp-light within the room.

"Yes, my husband!" the woman answered, with a significant smile. "What more natural? I find you in my room at the dead hour of night, and consequently my indignation can know no cessation until you honorably take me as your wife."

Sam laughed in a harsh, unnatural way.

"Quite a scheme, I must say, if it only works," was his dry answer, "but I am fearful that you have made calculations on something impossible, fair plotter. I have a wife, as you know."

"That matters not. She is gone, and you cannot find her—probably never will. My good name is at stake, and you shall either marry me, or I will turn you into a place where you will never see the light of day again."

"Bah!"

"Oh! you can say that if it suits you, but, at the same time, you know that what I say I will do. I have laid my plans well. I saw you when you were at the front of the house, and knew that you were going to try and effect an entrance. I sent Ferro to secrete himself in the back yard, where he could watch your movements unobserved. I raised this window so that you could make this your point of entrance. That was all that was necessary. You came and entered. Ferro saw you, and his word and mine is all-sufficient."

"And so, for the sake of getting an illegal

husband, who at best could but despise you, you would thus perjure yourself and acknowledge—”

“Anything! anything!” she cried, passionately, dropping her weapons and dropping on her knees before him with clasped hands.

“Then you are certainly the biggest fool, for an arch schemer and adventuress, that I ever saw!” Sam cried, quickly springing past her, and securing the weapons. “I am very much obliged, however, for your weakness which gives me advantage!”

“Villain!” she gasped, regaining her feet and staggering back a pace.

“Lady!” Sam also gasped, mockingly. “Pray do not take your failure too heavily at heart, because such things are liable to occur among the shrewdest of mortals. If you will have the kindness to show me out of the house by the front way, you will save me the necessity of shooting you in your tracks.”

The pallor upon her face changed to a flush of either anger or shame at this—Sam did not know which.

“Very well; I will not tempt you to desperation, because I have not even yet given you up. You shall be mine, even if I force you down to your death-bed and then marry you. Come! the house is deserted, and I will show you out.”

She led the way from the room into an upper hall, thence down a broad staircase to the front of the house.

While descending the stairs behind her, Sam carefully extracted the cartridges from the revolvers, and when they reached the door he handed the harmless weapons to her.

“I will not keep your man-killers,” he said, with a smile, “as you may want to use them on me at some future time.”

“You need not have been so careful to extract the loads,” she flashed back. “I love you too much to do you harm.”

“However that may be, I'd hate to let you have a good shot at me,” Sam assured, sarcastically, putting on his mask. “Ah! thank you—au revoir!”—as she opened the door.

He darted out, down the steps, across the street, and was gone.

The next morning opened up with a series of startling discoveries.

The local express office, which was also made a place of banking for those who had any superfluous money they did not need to use, was found to have been entered during the night and plundered of all the money contained in the safe.

Not a copper had been left in the place, and upon the wall was painted with a marking brush:

“Yours, With Gratitude, Sierra Sam.”

The town seemed turned into a literal pandemonium over this event.

One, for himself, had Samuel of the Sierras neatly scored, in his role of retaliation, and the worst of it was that the sufferers had nothing to do but stare the fact in the face and whistle.

Again the topic of conversation turned toward Jake Yuma, in a spirit of dissatisfaction.

“I'll be darned ef I'll stand it!” one miner cried, who had been a heavy loser. “I propose we take thet galoot, Yuma, and give him the penalty he proposed himself.”

“Hurrah! that's the ticket!” several sympathizers chorused. “He ain't no good, an' orter not tried ter stick hisself in.”

“It won't do ter tech him, till his ten days is up!” Joe Flanders demurred, and Joe was accepted of late as pretty good authority on general matters. “He's got his own way o' doin' things, and may pop Mr. Sierra Sam around before we like it!”

“I allow Flanders is right,” Hart, the owner of one of the new mines, assumed.

“And I persist that he is not!” Don Ramon cried, who had until now been simply a listener. “This Sierra Sam is a desperate character, and if the loafer Yuma can't do as he bragged he could, why I say string him up! Robbing the express office isn't the only thing Sierra Sam did last night.”

“It isn't?” Flanders queried, eying the Spaniard sharply. “What else did he do, pray?”

“Enough, I should say. He entered my mansion at the dead of night, when there was no one around, and attempted an assault upon my daughter, but she was too quick for him, and forced him out of the house at the muzzle of a revolver, where many women, less brave, would have fainted.

“How romantic!” Flanders remarked, a perceptible touch of sarcasm in his tones. “And where, pray, were you at this hour of night?”

“In bed, of course!” the Don replied, flushing.

“That don't correspond with your first story,” Flanders criticised. “You said there was no one around—and it looks very much like it, for, instead of forcing the bold burglar out, on her own responsibility, the fair Inez would have been likely to call for assistance. So, now, De Ramirz, it's no more than fair that you should, under the circumstances, give an account of your whereabouts at that dead-of-night hour, when all honest men should be abed!”

The bystanders gave a grunt of approval, and Ramirz fairly foamed with rage.

“I'll have you understand that I am an honorable gentleman, sir, and above being questioned!” he retorted fiercely.

“You may be the most notorious desperado in the country all the same!” Flanders declared, not at all abashed. “I've known nature's noblemen ere this to weigh light when some of their cloaks were taken off.”

“Perhaps I can throw sum light on this yer interestin' subject, ef nobody hain't objections ter offer!” a deep, sonorous voice cried; and looking around they saw Jake Yuma standing near, leaning on his rifle.

“If you have anything to say, say it!” Flanders called out, promptly.

“Waal, et ain't much,” Yuma allowed. “Ye see, I war out a-spyin' around ter see ef thar war any more murders goin' ter be committed, when I see'd two disguised chaps a-makin' fer my palatial residence over yander. Very nat-terally I meandered along arter 'em an' secreted myself, an' when they cum out o' my palace they seemed tuk back a hitch an' werry much disappointed at not findin' yer servent ter bum, huggin' up old Morpheus, wi' a stummie full o' Bacchus. Puttin' this an' that tewgether, an' rememberin' ther rising reflection an' the fallin' intonation o' their voices, et struck me somewhat purty pat that one o' these fellers was Don Ramon, heer, an' t'other one was Black Carlos.”

All eyes instantly turned to Ramirz, whose face was livid with passion at the exposure of his lie.

“It's a lie—an infernal lie!” he cried, fiercely. “I was at home in bed, and although my daughter did at first cry for help, I did not hear her. This is all I have to say on the matter. If you choose to take this black-bearded loafer's word in preference to mine, you are, I suppose, at liberty to do so. I'll bid you good-day.”

And he turned to go. But the figure of Yuma loomed up before him.

“See byar, Ramrod!” he observed, a peculiar grin upon his face, “I hope ye don't think you're going jest yet, do ye?”

“Why not?” the Don demanded, trying to make haughtiness cover his alarm.

“Oh, w'ot a question! Sorter off in yer memory, ain't ye? Didn't lisp somethin' about a certain black-whiskered loafer, did ye, jest a bit ago?”

“What if I did? I always say what I please and mean what I say!”

“Then, by ther holey polekats, you've got ter apologize—yas, sir-ee—apologize hev you got ter, right ter me, or I'll teach ye what fer sort o' loafer Yuma is.”

“Get out of my path, man. Don't you presume to lay a finger's weight on me!” the Don cried.

“Then you won't apologize?”

“No, never!”

The Arizonian leaped forward with a terrible yell, and threw himself upon the Don with such force that both went to the ground together heavily.

Yuma was on top, however, and his grasp at once encircled the Spaniard's throat.

“Help! help! a thousand dollars for help!” the Don managed to roar, before Yuma's grasp got so tight that it shut off his wind.

“Apologize or die!” Yuma cried, sternly.

“Quick!” But the Don's offer was too big money to lose by simply standing by and looking on; consequently a dozen burly fellows piled upon the Arizonian and jerked him off, allowing Ramirz to rise.

In doing so, however, to their astonishment and that of all other bystanders, they pulled off a complete false beard, mustache and wig, and Sierra Sam's handsome face was once more seen!

The great number of expressions and exclamations that followed was something amusing.

“Well, by all that's wonderful!” Joe Flanders ejaculated, “I for one never suspected it!”

De Ramirz uttered a devilish laugh.

“I suspected it long ago,” he said, sarcastically, “but chose to let you find it out for yourselves.”

“You lie!” Sam said, coolly. “If you had suspicioned such a thing you wouldn't have kept it still this long.”

“Put this man under arrest!” several miners cried, and Sam was forthwith deprived of the use of his arms.

“Now, then, there's no use of fooling in cases like this, boys!” Joe Flanders announced. “This man has robbed us, and, not that alone, has inveigled himself into our confidence, that he might work us the better to his own interest. I propose that we try him at once, and if we find him guilty, according to Western code, why, we'll have him shot to-morrow, at sunrise!”

A tremendous cheer went up.

“But hold on!” a voice interposed, and a stranger pushed forward. “Mebbe this is my man. I'm looking for a man who is palming himself off as Jake Yuma, the boss brawler of Big Butte. That's me!”

CHAPTER VIII.

STELLA'S PRISON.

LET US change the scene of our narrative for a few minutes.

About the same time, or may be an hour after, Sierra Sam had left the mansion of Ramirz, after his visit to the Don's daughter, a veiled woman, wrapped in a waterproof, dodged along through the darker portion of the mining camp, until she came to a drift in the side of the mountain.

During the early days of Rough Ranch's gold-fever, this drift had been worked for several hundred feet into the mountain, and a track even laid for a car with which to haul out the quartz rock; but, as no gold was found, the drift had been abandoned.

Entering the gloomy place with no apparent timidity, she followed it with rapid steps, as it descended into the bowels of the earth. Ere long she came to where the work on the drift had been abandoned, in the face of an underground stream of water of considerable size, which flowed gently along through its time-worn subterranean tunnel.

Pausing here, the woman procured a whole rubber suit, for wading purposes, exchanged it for her own attire, stowing that away behind a rock, where she had first found the rubber suit.

She then stepped into the stream, which was belt deep, and followed its course, as it ran to the left, with careful steps.

The channel that high waters had worn out, above her head, was barely of sufficient height to admit of her walking erect, and in many instances she was obliged to bend so low that her face nearly touched the waters.

Following the course of the stream for fully ten minutes, the space overhead suddenly increased greatly, and she stepped from the stream into a large cavern, the sandy floor of which covered considerable space.

The sides and ceiling of this strange place were of rugged rocky formation, and the air was close and damp.

As soon as she stepped into the cavern the veiled woman produced a lantern from a niche in the rocks, and lit it, for darkness there reigned supreme.

By the light thus afforded, she crossed the sandy floor of the cavern until she came to a temporary room or cell, made with boards and provided with a door, which was fastened on the outside with padlock and chain.

Producing a key, the woman unlocked the door and entered.

The light of her lantern revealed that the place was tenanted, and that, too, by no less a person than Stella Slocum, the bride of Sierra Sam, who was partly reclining upon a rude lounge, the only furniture in the place.

She looked up with a frown, as the masked woman entered.

“Why do you come here to mock at me?” she demanded, her eyes flashing indignantly. “I should think you could at least leave me alone, if you persist in keeping me imprisoned in this awful place.”

“I shall likely consult my own ideas on the matter,” the veiled woman replied. “It is not for me to be dictated to, when I hold the reins. You can have your liberty at any time, as you full well know—on conditions.”

“Conditions, indeed! I would die here before I would promise, on leaving this place, to go to some distant part of the country and never see my husband again.”

“Poor child! how I do pity you,” the veiled woman said. “Once I was like you—loving

and true to him; but after I found him out to be a bigamist and a heartless wretch, I swore that, so far as I could prevent, none other should ever be aught to him."

"I do not believe you!" Stella cried. "Nothing you could ever say would convince me that my husband is untruthful and false."

"So said I, when I married him, my dear. But I found how utterly wrong was my opinion. You may not think it my business, but I cannot allow you to wreck your young life upon such a man as Sierra Sam. Only when you promise to put a thousand miles of distance between yourself and him, will I grant you a release from captivity. Persist in your refusal to come to terms, and you are doomed to live and die in this place, in under the ground."

"Better so than to come to your terms!" Stella replied, firmly. "I have great faith that my husband will sooner or later come to my assistance, and woe be to you if he find out who you are!"

The veiled jailoress laughed tauntingly.

"Your faith will die like a freshly-set plant under the scorching rays of a summer sun," she said, with sarcasm, "when you wait and wait—and 'he cometh not,' she said. Why, only last night I saw him climb by ladder into the Ramirz mansion, undoubtedly to see the fair Inez!"

"Eah! that lie does not dampen my ardor a bit!" Stella retorted, bravely. "In fact, as I have told you repeatedly, nothing you can say will shake my faith in my husband."

"Oh! well, if you be stubborn, I am not to blame. In trying to do for your personal good, I am sure no one could censure me."

She took the lantern then and left the little prison, being careful to quickly close and lock the door behind her.

"I'll send you some food to morrow," she said. "I forgot to bring it to-night. You won't starve on love, I guess."

"Your great kindness merits reward!" Stella answered.

Then she heard her veiled enemy move away, and soon the light was extinguished, by which she judged that the woman had left the cavern.

"Oh! that wicked fury!" the imprisoned bride breathed, as a sense of loneliness stole over her. "Why is it she keeps me shut up here, and brings me evil reports of my husband? Does she want to kill me or drive me crazy? Does she want me to go far away from him, in order that she may have a chance to win him?"

A footstep on the sand outside interrupted her reverie, and sent a thrill of terror through her frame.

Who was coming?

Some one surely, for the footsteps became plainer to her hearing, and were coming toward her cell.

Nearer and nearer! Then she saw a pair of fiery gleaming eyes peering through the cracks at her.

With a scream of terror she shrunk into the further corner of the apartment; and when she heard the door wrenched fiercely open, all her senses left her, and she fell to the floor in a deep swoon, from which she did not awaken for a long time.

The individual who thrust himself forward with the introductory conclusion of "that's me!" was a burly, black-bearded pilgrim, but he did not very closely resemble the recently disguised Sam'l of the Sierras.

"I reckon this is your man," Joe Flanders assumed, pointing first to Sierra Sam and then to the disguise, which lay upon the ground. "We jest relieved this feller of some superfluous hair."

"Hello! Why, great snortin' snakes, this feller is Sam Slocum, ther detective!" the genuine Yuma ejaculated.

"Alias Sierra Sam, the robber!" Don Ramirz sneered.

"Oho! Bin up ter that racket, has he? Waal, now, gents, I tell ye what. A feller ken't kick ther tenderest part o' my shins, an' hurt me half so bad as he kin by fellowiously appropriatin' my individuality an' infringin' on my reputation. When a galoot does that, he jest riles me cl'ar up ter ther horns, an' he's got ter fight. Tharfore, jest let that feller loose, an' I'll show ye how I dusted out a hull pack of severall thousan' road-agents, single-handed. Set loose yer robber, I say, an' I'll assist him ter climb up Calvary in ther jerk of a lamb's tail."

"Sorry for you, my friend," Flanders replied, "but we shall have to give this man a trial first; then, should he be sentenced to hang, and the boys say it's right I've, no objections to his standing up and giving you satisfaction."

"Hurrah! that's ther talk! Honor hev you got cl'ar down to ther hole in yer socks!" Yuma the original declared, enthusiastically capering about in high glee. "Hurry up wi' yer trial, feller-citizens, so that I can git in my work on this son of a gun who durst wantonly desecrate my satin finished name an' fame by appropriatin' it to hisself."

"You may get more than you bargain for!" Sam observed, quietly.

"Oho! Heer that, wull ye?" Yuma roared. "Ther hogus chap torks famuss. Why, ye leetle pigmy, ef ye kin but git in one squar' sockdolager on ther surface o' my sensative smeller, durn me ef I don't git down on my knees an' pray ter these hyar noble-hearted citizens o' Rough Ranch ter set ye at liberty."

Sam smiled, and his eyes twinkled merrily. He was evidently not at all alarmed; he could take care of himself in case of a scrimmage with the man he had counterfeited.

"Enough of this!" Flanders commanded. "We will at once proceed to give this man an informal trial, on the facts of the case. I will undertake the responsibility, of counsel for the people, and Slocum can choose for himself, though I dare say he'll have a hard time of securing counsel."

"Not at all," a stranger said, stepping forward. "I will act for Sierra Sam."

He was well dressed, wore a heavy reddish beard and mustache, and his hair was of the same color, crowned by a jaunty sombrero.

In appearance he was somewhat a cross between a Southern planter and a card-sharp, such as frequently are seen on the Mississippi river packets—men who were seemingly not designed for any particular manual labor.

His gaze did not waver when it met that of Flanders and the others.

"Who are you?" Flanders demanded, eying him sternly.

"Jack Racer, from New Orleans, if it is any of your business," was the pert reply. "I'm a stranger in your burg, but know the prisoner by detective note, and shall help him all I can."

"You'll lose your case," Joe asserted, sternly. "Yonder comes the stage, full of strangers. I'll go and select twelve disinterested parties as jurors—then well get down to business."

He soon came back with a dozen strangers, some well dressed, and others in working clothes.

The trial then began, in a sort of way.

Flanders opened the prosecution by stating the case as it stood: How Sierra Sam had come to Rough Ranch; how his bride had turned up missing; the circumstances of his flight and his threat; the murders and the notices; the recent robbery, and the discovery of the man, disguised.

Several witnesses were called and corroborated these statements.

The defense then made an appeal, arguing that it was but natural that the prisoner should feel hard toward the town; stated that Sam had publicly announced his willingness to withdraw hostilities, when his bride should be restored to him, he believing that she was imprisoned in the town, and he having no liberty therein, to search for her.

The Southerner's defense was strong, eloquent and to the point, and created some impression among the jurymen.

Would it prove sufficient?

Sam decided negatively.

He also, while watching Racer, had discovered that the eloquent defense was uttered in a disguised voice.

Who was this stranger?

He had no way of judging, as Racer kept his face averted.

"Have you anything to say?" Flanders asked, turning to Sam.

"Nothing," was the answer. "Mr. Racer has stated the cased good enough to suit me."

"Very well. Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard both sides of the case, and it now remains for you to say whether Sierra Sam shall hang, or go free!"

The men arose and walked off to a short distance, and consulted.

When they returned, one of the twelve said:

"After mature deliberation, we have decided by a majority of one, that the prisoner at the bar is guilty and merits a sentence of death."

"Then in behalf of the people, I do sentence Sierra Sam to be shot to-morrow, at sunrise!" Flanders said.

"And now, gents, shall he be allowed to give Mr. Yuma satisfaction, or not?"

An affirmative shout went up from a hundred throats!

CHAPTER IX.

PUGILISTIC.

It was thus settled that the original Yuma and Sierra Sam should fight, in order that the former, if possible, might obtain satisfaction for the injury the Californian had done him by surreptitiously appropriating his cognomen.

"Keerect, my noble warriors; that's ther tune ter sing in L. M.—long meter. Squar' up yer man hyar, and I'll see ef I can't do ther act perzam. Trot out Samuel, ther shyster, and ef I don't knock him inter the middle of next week in less time than it takes to whisper bug-juice, ye kin call me no good."

"Release Sierra Sam!" Joe Flanders ordered, "but let every man have his pistol ready, lest the fellow escapes!"

"You need not observe so much caution!" Sam retorted, rising to his feet and rubbing his wrists to get the blood in circulation, after the cords had been removed. "I do not intend to run unless I get a better chance. So you are anxious to have a disturbance with me, are you, Mr. Yuma?"

"You bet yer last dollar I am!" the Arizonian replied, with a horrible sort of grin. "I want ter mutilate ye sumw'at as an example fer other men never to steal my thunder!"

"Well, as I am the offender, I suppose I must honor you," Sam said, smilingly. "In what way do you propose to celebrate?"

"With these ornaments what nature be queathed us—sluggers!" Yuma tragically cried, exhibiting a huge pair of fists. "All I want is ter git one diff at ye wi' these sledge-hammers, an' ye'll think a pocket edition uv ther millennium has struck ye!"

"All right! Get yourself into position, and fire away. Ef you get bruised, ye mustn't cry quarter, fer this is a row of your own instigation."

"Never you worry. Et takes a deal ter make me squeal," poetically declared Yuma.

The two men got into position, facing each other. The crowd formed a ring, and all adjacent places of observation were quickly occupied by those who were anxious to see if the original Yuma was as good as he claimed to be—which a few regarded as extremely doubtful.

"Ready!" Sam said.

"Ready!" responded Yuma; then they stepped a pace nearer, and began sparring lightly and carefully, or, in other words, "feeling" each other.

At this juncture who should push her way forward but Sally Slick—or Little Luck, as she was known in a former Sierra Sam romance.

"Whoopee!" she exclaimed, when she took in the situation at a glance. "My old man got ketched at his racket, didn't he? Told him he would. T'other fellow can't lick him, tho'—bet money on it! I say, some o' you fellers better bring a wash-tub o' water, kase Yuma will want ter give his nose a bath arter Sammy gits in a couple of raps."

The crowd laughed, and the next minute laughed again, for, just then, whack! Sierra Sam's fist shot out, and hit the Arizonian square on the nose with such force that the victim went to earth in a decided hurry.

He quickly assumed a sitting position, however, and felt of his somewhat flattened nasal appendage dolefully.

"Oh! lordy, what a sockdolager that was!" he gasped, hoarsely. "Ef I war guilty of ownin' a mule as could kick as hard as that, I'd shoot him fer buzzard food. But, thot warn't no fair shake—no, sir-ee. I made a kerslip—"

"And bu'sted yer lip!" chimed in Sally Slick, with a grin. "Take an urchin's advice, and let Sammy alone, uncle, or your eyes'll be in mournin' fer a week."

"Durn my luck, no! I'm goin' ter krock blazes out of him!" Yuma roared, regaining his feet and rushing ferociously at the Californian.

A number of blows were exchanged, and although Sierra Sam did not get hit once, Yuma's face looked more like a pumice than anything else, when he finally fell to the ground senseless, from the stunning effect of Sam's parting shoulder-hit.

A tremendous cheer went up as the Arizonian went down, and Sierra Sam re-arranged his necktie.

"Most honorable body," he said, with great sarcasm, "you can put up your pop-guns, as I surrender myself to your most tender mercies!"

"Take him to the strong cabin, bind him hand and foot, lock him in, and station a guard outside!" were Joe Flanders's orders.

"Where's the young kid—I want her?"

But Miss Sally Slick was not to be seen just then; she had vanished as quietly as she had come.

Sam was marched to the jail, followed by the populace.

This jail, or strong cabin, adjoined the Ramirz mansion. When Rough Ranch was an infant camp, as compared with its present size, it had been built as a place of safe-keeping for rough characters that frequently pounced down upon the town.

The main structure was of logs, while the door was of triple thickness of oaken planks.

The only window was grated with heavy iron bars, so that any one unlucky enough to get locked within the place, could not well make his escape without assistance.

Into the jail Sierra Sam was conducted and bound hand and foot. He was then left lying upon the ground, which served in lieu of other flooring, the place was cleared of the crowd, and the door locked upon him.

Sam was well satisfied that he was not destined to hang, for he knew that his six followers would be apprised of his capture, by Sally, and would make a strong effort to secure his liberty.

So he felt little concern about himself; his main worry was about Stella.

What was her situation—her fate?

It had been a source of constant anxiety to him because he could learn nothing definite as to her whereabouts. That he should sometime hear from her captors, he had little doubt, and he was not wrong; it came sooner than he expected.

A sheet of paper was thrust in through the grating of the window, and fluttered to the ground directly in front of him, so that he was enabled to see what was written thereon without changing positions.

It was in an evidently disguised hand and ran as follows:

"SIERRA SAM—You are in jail, helpless, and with death staring you in the face. To-morrow at sunrise you are to be shot, unless rescued. I am the only one who has the power to help you; also I can restore your bride to you when you are free. It was I who defended you at the trial. At the imminent risk of my own life I am willing to do this—rescue and restore your wife to you—but of course I naturally expect compensation for my services. It was for money, which I knew you had a plenty of, that I abducted your bride, and it is only by paying money that you will ever be able to set eyes on her. Therefore, if you agree to give me two thousand dollars upon being released, you shall have both your release and your bride upon payment of said sum. If you agree to this, cry out, 'All right,' in a loud voice, and to-night you will be rescued. If you fail to agree, I will kill your pretty wife within the hour, as she might better be dead than the wife of a man who would not save her because it would cost a paltry sum of money. I await your answer.

"UNKNOWN."

Sierra Sam burst into a loud laugh, as he finished reading.

"Your game won't work," he shouted, in a loud voice. "I'm going to swing or be shot and don't want my liberty. Bring my bride to the killing-bee, to-morrow, and give her her liberty then, and you shall be paid for it."

Through the grates a scornful laugh came in, as the answer, and he heard a person walk away.

"A very clever dodge to lighten my purse, without being of advantage to me," Sam muttered. "I wonder who I am indebted to for this kindness? Ah! yes, the racy Racer, who so eloquently defended me during the trial! Enough of the womanly in my counsel's figure and speech, for me to recognize the fair Inez, in the Racer. Ha! ha! it's a cold day when you find me blind, my fair friend, and I shall now know for a certainty to whom I am indebted for the abduction of my bride!"

Night drew on, and the prisoner saw the stars appear, one by one in the heavens, as he lay gazing upward between the grates of the window.

"Should think I'd get some word from Sally!" he mused, "for if I am not greatly mistaken, some of my men were about town, to day."

It was a couple of hours, however, before he heard a tap at the window, and looking up, saw the face of Sally Slick peering through the gratings, to which she partly clung.

"'Sh!' she said, shaking her head in a warning way.

"It'll be all right, by'me by. Some one lost a quart bottle o' whisky, and the guard on t'other side, is gittin' dead drunk on it. The fellers will be heer, time enough, I guess; so hold yer hosses, and be cucumber."

She dropped out of sight then, but soon reappeared.

"I've got an idea," she said. "Your hands are fastened with rope. Jest hold 'em up above

your head, an' stretch 'em as fur apart as ye kin, and I'll cut 'em loose, an' then skedaddle."

Sam looked surprised.

"How?" he asked.

"Thusly!" and she thrust her hand through the grating. It contained in its grasp a large handsome long range revolver, which was cocked and ready for use.

Sam shook his head dubiously.

"I'm rather afraid you are not equal to that emergency, my child!" he said. "It's a ticklish feat."

"Did my aim ever fail?" Sal replied, tersely. "Up with your hands, and hold 'em steady!"

With some hesitation the Californian obeyed.

Out went her little arm; her keen eye ran along the barrel of the weapon; then there was a sharp report, and Sam held up his hands, minus their bonds. The bullet had cut the rope neatly in twain.

"Well done!" he said, looking toward the window—but Sally was gone!

The Arizona bruiser was badly thumped, and when he recovered from his swoon his face was swollen all out of shape. With several cuts upon it, and the skin barked from the nose, he presented a grotesque and laughable appearance.

He could hardly see out of his discolored eyes, but, having been carried to the Casino, he was able to locate the bar, and hastily applied for beverage, which was given him.

"Jerusalem! w'at a fearful change in my once manly mug!" he mumbled, after he had taken a good survey of himself in the glass behind the bar. "Cuss my boots ef et weren't perfectly terrific how that galoot did pummel me. I'd 'a' never thort it possible."

After washing up and spending a couple of hours in grim meditation, he imbibed several more decoctions of "condolence," and then began to hold private interviews with several of the roughest characters of the town, first treating them.

As a result, when the town was quiet, and few people were abroad, that night, a dozen hard-looking customers, headed by Yuma, assembled in the vicinity of the jail.

"We'll fix things now," the Arizonian said. "As I told ye before, ef we war ter leave that feller in jail till mornin', ten ter one he wouldn't be thar, an' tharfore I head this movement ter give him a quiet boost ter once and make sure. Is this ther understanding, my larkies?"

The men assented.

"Then come along—let's move on the bastile at once!"

With stealthy tread they approached the jail!

CHAPTER X.

ALMOST A LYNCHING.

It looked as if Sierra Sam was a doomed man, as Yuma and his ruffians moved down upon the jail.

Sam heard their approach and knew it was not his own followers.

It needed no hard guessing for him to suspect the character of the raid. They were coming to lynch him!

He quickly lay down upon the ground and rewound the thongs about his feet and hands to have the appearance of being bound.

"I'll try 'em a whack before they pack me off," he muttered.

By this time the would-be lynchers had reached the door, which was savagely shaken.

"I guess the cuss is asleep; don't make much noise," the voice of Yuma was heard saying. "We want no alarm now."

Sam then heard a file working rapidly, and concluded that they were filing off the hasp, which in conjunction with the padlock held the door fastened shut.

It was not long ere he heard a grunt of approval, and the following instant saw the door swing open and the men pour into the jail, Yuma in the lead.

"Hello! the durned skunk's awake," he ejaculated, as he perceived that Sam was awake. "We war unnecessarily cautious. I say, ye iron-fisted galoot, d'y'e know what we're goin' ter do wi' ye?"

"Dunno!" Sam answered, quietly. "Going to liberate me?"

"Oh, you bet! liberate ye from all ther cares, trials and tribulations to this earthly coil. In other words, we're goin' ter give you a story in song, where the swing went a little bit higher. Grab him, boyees, and transport him to the shades 'neath the big oak outside, where there's rest for ther weary."

Half a dozen of the men stepped forward and lifted Sam to a standing position.

As they did so his hands became quickly disengaged, and he seized a pair of revolvers from the belt of one of the roughs—self-cockers they were, too!

"Back! back, you hell hounds!" the Californian cried, firing right and left. "Lynch Sierra Sam, will ye? Out of this jail, or I'll kill every one of you!"

But the ruffians rushed upon their enemy with savage yells, he clubbing them back and firing, while Yuma roared:

"Take him alive! Hurrah! we'll string the rascal up!"

The noise of the battle soon brought Flanders and fifty others down upon the jail, and they soon quelled the fight by hauling off those of the lynchers who were not already disabled or stone dead by shots from Sam's terrible pistols.

When the reinforcements came he threw down the weapons and submitted to be rebound.

"What the devil is the meaning of this fracas?" Flanders demanded of the Californian.

"It means that the gang under Yuma came after me to invite me to a lynch picnic, and found the Cyclone to home, you bet!" Sam replied. "They pitched on to me, and I should judge got the worst of it."

"Which they richly deserved," the proprietor of the Casino averred. "I'll see to it that you will not be disturbed until sunrise."

The cabin was cleared of all except the prisoner, who was locked in, and once more left to his own reflections.

Morning dawned, bright and clear, with a fresh breeze blowing down from the mountains, laden with the exquisite perfume of pine and wild grape.

The town was early astir, in anticipation of the first lynching-bee that had occurred there; and while the miners' wives put their hair in papers, in honor of the occasion, the miners themselves resorted to the Casino to "lubricate" and talk over the coming event.

A party was ranged along the bar, imbibing "family disturbance," when there was a crash of glass, and an arrow buried itself in the mirror behind the bar.

To the shaft of it was wrapped a paper, which Flanders quickly secured.

In penciled chirography, were these words:

"Beware! If one hair of Sierra Sam's head is hurt to-day, or any attempt made upon his life, the mining camp of Rough Ranch is doomed!"

"SIERRA SAM'S SEVEN."

"Humph!" Flanders said, after reading the admonition aloud. "We'll see about that. We'll see if the town is to be run by mob law. Look! the sun is just coming up. Let's get to business. Arm yourselves well, and be prepared for an attack from these road-robbers!"

The bar was deserted, and in less than five minutes the vicinity of the jail was black with people, who were eager to see the execution.

Accompanied by the six men, who were to act as his assistants, Flanders advanced to the jail and unlocked the door.

When they flung it open, however, a sight met their gaze which caused them to start back, agast.

Stretched out upon the ground, in his own blood, lay the body of Sierra Sam, all but the head!

That had been cut off and was nowhere to be found within the jail.

There could be no doubt that it was the body of Sierra Sam, for there was his clothing, his top boots and sombrero, and even his handsome gold watch and chain.

A search of his pockets also revealed a roll of money aggregating about fifty dollars, but no papers or anything else to betray who were his executioners.

The discoverers' cries of horror, brought others to the scene, and many were the cries of astonishment.

"We've been cheated out of our vengeance, by thunder!" one miner cried, angrily.

"That's true as preachin'!" Joe Flanders assented, scratching his head. "Some one's stole a march on us. Who is it?"

"Who tried it last night?" another citizen suggested, significantly.

Flanders swore, roundly, which was something unusual with him.

"If that cussed galoot, Yuma, is at the bottom of this, he shall swing for it!" he cried, fiercely. "I gave him fair warning, after the attempted lynching. Where is he?"

A search was made, and Yuma was seen running in the direction of the stables beyond the Casino. He was bent on escape.

"That settles it," Flanders cried, seizing a

riff from a miner's hand. "I'll show him what he has brought upon himself!"

He raised the weapon and fired, and Yuma dropped like a log.

He never stirred afterward, for the bullet killed him the instant it struck him.

"Throw his carcass into the creek for the fishes!" Joe Flanders commanded. "I'll run this town hereafter, and see if we can have law and order!"

A deafening cheer greeted this declaration, which struck the majority of the crowd in a tender spot.

Attention was then turned to the "stiff" of the unfortunate Californian.

"What shall be done with it?" was the query of several.

"It shall have a decent burial," Flanders declared, decidedly. "Through us the fellow has suffered an even more horrible fate than we would have awarded him and I shall respect his person enough to give it a civilized burial."

At this juncture Sally Slick pushed forward.

"I say, hello!" she cried, glancing askance at the headless body of the murdered man. "I hear my old man has met with a sort of difficulty. Is that him?"

"Yes—what's left of him?" Flanders answered.

"That's too bad!" Sally said, giving vent to a whistle of sympathy. "He was jest as squar' as an eight-day clock, Sammy was. Spose you've no objections to deliverin' the body up to me, seein' as we war pards?"

"Well, I rather opine I have," Joe replied, gruffly. "It happens that you're jest about the man I want to see—or rather, the gal."

"Git out! What do you want of me?"

"Oh! simply a little information, that's all. You see, we're anxious to investigate the case of Sierra Sam's other six cherubs, who have threatened us with total annihilation."

"Humph! You better not go a-fishin' after them fellers," Sal warned, "for, if you do, you'll come out at the little end of the horn, I tell you. As fer me, ye can't prove nothin' by me, no more'n you can make a dumb man sing!"

"We'll test the matter," Flanders gritted, and at a motion from him Sally was seized.

The body of the unfortunate Californian was then hauled out of the jail, and Sally thrust in and the door locked on her.

"There!" Flanders shouted. "That's where you'll stay till you get ready to tell us where Sierra Sam's pals are to be found!"

"Bet you ten cents ag'in' a dollar I won't!" Sal fired back, defiantly. "I'll get out of here, and when I do, ef I don't spile your party m-tache, ye can call me a liar!"

Flanders winced at this, and swore, as he walked away.

His mustache was one of his greatest prides, for it was certainly a handsome affair, both on account of its great size, and also on account of its blonde color and graceful curve, as it stretched across either cheek.

Sally laughed wickedly after he was gone, and put in the better share of the day in sleep.

When her supper of bread and water had been partaken of, and darkness had settled over the town, she began work.

Taking a knife from her dress, she began to dig down into the ground, close to the rear wall, and as fast as the dirt was loosened, she scooped it out with her hands.

Like a beaver did she toil until the perspiration trickled down over her face. But she stuck grittily at the work for five hours with scarcely a pause.

At the expiration of that time she stood without the jail, a triumphant expression upon her dirty face.

"Now for the mustache and revenge," she said, speeding away.

CHAPTER XII.

FLANDERS LOSES.

On the following morning when Joe Flanders emerged upon the street his friends burst into a roar of laughter.

"What in blazes are you laughing at?" Joe demanded, gruffly.

"Fergot suthin' hav'n't ye?" a miner observed, "or bin hevin' a family disturbance with your wife, eh?"

Flanders clapped his hand suddenly to his upper lip, with an oath. His handsome mustache was gone! Sally Slick had kept her promise, by shearing the handsome appendage off so close to his lip that but a stubble remained.

"That cussed little vixen said she'd fix me, an' she's done it. Oh! blast her; if I ketch her

she shall pay dearly for this!" Joe cried in his hot anger, and rushed toward the jail, followed by the crowd, to find her not, but on the door was pinned a piece of paper, upon which was hastily scrawled the following:

"MR. JOE FLANDERS:

"You can't cum it. You better go work in a salt mine to git rid of some of your freshness. How's yer lip? I had a mind to amputate your smeller at the same time. Ta! ta!"

"Yours confidentially,

"SLICK SAL—OR SAL SLICK—TAKE YER CHOICE."

Flanders tore the paper in shreds, but not soon enough, for several of the crowd had read it, and the laugh that ensued was something immense.

"The gal dug out, and it wasn't my fault I got beat!" Joe growled, betaking himself back to the Casino.

The day passed quietly.

The body of the beheaded man was decently buried near the jail, a large crowd turning out to witness the interment.

Every one was armed, for it was feared that there would be an attack from the road-agents; but none was made.

Later that afternoon, however, another demonstration of the road-riders' vengeance was made in an attack upon the in-coming stage.

Six masked men pounced down upon the conveyance, in a lonely desile, and not only made the passengers fork over, but also broke open the treasure-box, extracted its contents, and gave the driver a letter to deliver to the "boss" of Rough Ranch.

As Joe Flanders was now so considered, the letter was given to him, and he proceeded to read aloud to the crowd:

"To the Rogues of Rough Ranch, Greeting:

"Fair warning was given to you to offer no harm to the person of our leader, Sierra Sam. You heeded us not, and consequently incurred our wrath. Behold the fruits of our vengeance, in the robbing of the stage, and be on the lookout for what is to follow."

SIERRA SAM'S SEVEN."

That night about nine o'clock a frame shanty was discovered on fire, and was quickly consumed.

This fire had but fairly begun when two other shanties in different parts of the town were discovered on fire.

This fact, as soon as it became known, created considerable consternation among the people.

And for the second time in the history of Rough Ranch a Vigilance Committee was organized and the members scattered through the camp.

But the incendiaries were not to be found; they had done their work quietly but surely, and made good their escape.

Nearly a week after the fire a strange character appeared in Rough Ranch, rented a table in the Casino and opened for business.

She was evidently a young woman, judging by the graceful contour of her figure, which was neatly clad; but whether beautiful or otherwise was not for curious ones to know, as her face was hidden behind a black thick veil, which had two eyeholes cut in it for her two sharp eyes to peer through.

That it was her desire to conceal her identity was evident; but she at once attracted a deal of attention, and was not long in starting up a game, in which she "skinned" a bevy of miners out of their lucre in a very short space of time, and with the sang froid of an experienced gambler.

As may be surmised, this did not decrease the interest in her, and finally Joe Flanders felt inclined to try his luck, to the tune of fifty a side, at an opportune moment when the table of the supposedly fair pasteboard manipulator was deserted, except of Mademoiselle Marie, as she announced herself.

Joe was hardly a lady's man, and was rather timid in feminine society; but after she had won the stake from him, with a quiet laugh, he lost much of his bashfulness.

"You play too strong a game for me, that's sure," he said, ruefully watching her tuck away the crisp note with a roll of others.

"Indeed I am a very poor player," she replied, "having had but little experience prior to coming here to Rough Ranch."

"Goin' to run the business?" Joe queried, in curiosity.

"Possibly, for a time. I came here to meet a party, but learn that he has been so unfortunate as to lose his life."

"Oh, you mean Sierra Sam, eh?"

"Yes. It seems, from all I can hear, that it was an unlucky step that brought him here to

Rough Ranch with his bride. Has the young lady been found yet?"

"Guess not. Never heard anything about her lately," Joe replied, his curiosity by no means lessening. "So you were after Sierra Sam, eh? Female detective?"

"Perhaps—perhaps not," was the brief reply.

But that was sufficient. From that minute it went out that Mlle. Marie was a detective, and had come to Rough Ranch to arrest Sam for some criminal offense, arriving just too late to secure him.

Then some one started the report that Sierra Sam was not gone at all to "that other place," but still existed in life and flesh.

After closing business at the Casino that night, the new-comer, Marie, betook herself to the Ranirz mansion, and rapped at the door.

Several minutes later the summons was answered by Don Ramon himself, who surveyed the masked stranger in great surprise.

"Good-evening," Marie saluted, in a prompt, business-like way. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mademoiselle Marie, private detective, of New Orleans."

"Well, what does that concern me?" the Don demanded, coldly. "I am not aware that I am interested in any detective case."

"Perhaps not, but I have a desire to talk with you on a subject of importance."

"That you can do right here, if you like," Ramirz said, not offering to admit her within doors.

Marie gave vent to a "humph" of disgust, but proceeded:

"I came to ask in regard to a certain Western individual by the name of Sierra Sam. Do you know where he is?"

The Don laughed coarsely.

"From his record, I infer that he has emigrated to a land where the temperature is exceedingly warm."

"Sierra Sam is not dead. You know it and I know it. I want to know what has become of Sierra Sam—for money!" Marie persisted.

"In which case you will have to go and inquire of some one else, my dear woman," the Don replied, "as I know absolutely nothing of the outlaw, more than that his headless carcass has been buried somewhere on the outskirts of the town."

"You are telling me a lie!" the woman said, as she descended the steps to the street; "at least I think so; and if I find it out to be so, I will kill you!"

The next morning the town was flooded with placards, framed in the following language:

"\$5,000 REWARD!

"I will pay the above-named sum to the party or parties who will deliver into my custody Sierra Sam, the frontier ferret, alive and well, within ten days, as I believe that said Sierra Sam is yet alive and a prisoner in this place. (Signed) Mlle. MARIE, "Female Detective."

What did Mlle. Marie want with the Californian, that she should be willing to pay so big a sum?

And was there any foundation in the supposition that Sam was really yet of the earth earthly?

These were subjects discussed by the groups who thronged the streets, and Mlle. Marie was the center of close observation; consequently her business at the card table was great.

Every card sharp in Rough Ranch tried to beat her at poker, casino, monte and old sledge, and got "left" so far, that they retired with little bravado, and many dollars out of pocket. Ever quiet, modest and pleasant, the Unknown still had enough dignity to command respect and, by a stern glance, to check insult.

All day long was the Casino crowded, and all day long money changed into Marie's hands, and was complacently pocketed, while a cocked five shooter lay conveniently at her hand. So that when night came the reputation of Mademoiselle Marie was something immense. She had beaten the town at cards, and added several thousand dollars to her capital.

Among the "lucky" spirits of Rough Ranch, it was acknowledged that nobody stood a ghost of a chance at cards, alongside Don Ramon de Ramirz.

So far as cards were concerned, he was alleged to be a second sight seer, and had never been known to lose a game where any great amount of money was up.

So, when he heard of Mlle. Marie's achievements he resolved to see for himself if she really was so great an expert as reported.

Arming himself with all the ready cash in his possession, and dressing himself in his best, he resorted to the Casino, "to beard the lioness in her den," as he expressed it.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GAME OF POKER.

Straight to the Casino did the Don proceed, to find her disengaged. The chair on the opposite side of the table was unoccupied; he slipped into it with a suave smile, while a crowd immediately gathered around.

"Ahem! I hear you are getting a big name for card playing!" the Don said, surveying the veiled Unknown, sharply.

"Oh! Because I've had a streak of luck in winning a few games, I need not be classed as an expert!" Mlle. Marie replied, calmly.

Don Ramon smiled.

"Just so," he assented; so, I thought I would call around and in case you were disengaged, to beg leave to have the honor of changing your luck as you call it."

Marie uttered a peculiar little laugh.

"If monsieur desires to show his proficiency, let him put up a goodly sum of money; I will not play for a trifle."

"Of course I will play you for any sum you may wish, to the limit of that pile!" Ramirz answered, taking a roll of bills from his pocket, and laying it upon the table.

"How much?" Marie asked, with apparent carelessness.

"Five thousand dollars!" Ramirz said, triumphantly. "To accommodate your means I shall have to divide it, eh?"

"Not at all!" the veiled lady replied, producing a roll of greenbacks, and counting out ten crisp bills, of five hundred dollars each.

"Phew! you must have been striking it rich!" the Don sneered.

"I can put up dollar for dollar, with you, or any other man in Rough Ranch!" Marie retorted. "So put your stamps in the landlord's hands, here, if you are anxious to lose 'em."

"You'll see how I will lose," the Don returned, sharply, putting his money in Flanders's hands, as did Marie—making more money than Joe had handled for many a day.

Poker was the chosen game, and the play at once commenced, with a new pack of cards.

Dense grew the crowd about the table, to watch with eager interest the turning of the game that was to decide who was entitled to the ten thousand dollars.

"If I win this, do you propose to call for revenge?" Mlle. Marie asked, as the game progressed very nearly evenly.

"If I lose, I am still game, providing my mines are any good. I never met the person, yet, who could beat me at cards—consequently I am not greatly worried!"

But he was worried shortly after, when the turning of a single card decided the game, and Joe Flanders handed over the stakes to the veiled Mademoiselle.

"Eternal curses on your luck!" the Don gasped, growing livid with rage. "You cheated, and I demand my money back!"

"You'll have to draw blood to get it!" Marie replied, laying her white hand upon her revolver. "If I cheated let the crowd unanimously say so, and I will refund the money which I have fairly won from you."

"You needn't kick, Ramirz!" Joo Flanders interposed, "for you were beaten fairly. The gal did it square, and all you can do is grin and bear it."

"I'll be cursed if I will!" the Don roared. "I'll lose all, or nothing. Where is the person who will loan me not five thousand more but fifty thousand dollars, for a few minutes, and take a mortgage on my entire mining estate?"

"What is the value of the whole business?" Mlle. Marie asked calmly.

"Exactly the sum I named!"

"Then draw up a mortgage and I'll go you half the amount you name!" Marie said. "That is as much as any broker would give you."

Ramirz knew this well enough, and instantly turned to Flanders.

"Send for Giles, the lawyer," he ordered. "I'll either win back all, or lose everything—and, mind you—" turning to Marie—"if I lose this game, it were better for you that you died years ago, as I will guarantee you'll never plunder another man of his riches."

Marie laughed.

"I am prepared for any ruffianism you can offer," she answered, unabashed. "Did I not know that your life is doomed, I would not hesitate to shoot you where you sit, for daring to threaten me, you brute!"

Giles, the lawyer, came soon, and drew up a mortgage for \$25,000, which, if not paid in seven days, would vest the title to all the property named in Mlle. Marie.

As soon as this instrument was properly executed, the veiled woman sport paid over into

Ramirz's hands the full sum indicated, which he in turn handed over to Flanders.

Marie then covered it and a new pack of cards were produced, shuffled, cut and dealt.

By this time the saloon was crowded to suffocation, and a perfect babel of voices were making the night hideous with betting, cursing and bacchanalian song.

Many of the Spanish element of the town were by this time present, and of course bet high upon the Don, but the majority of the wagers were made upon Mlle. Marie's success.

The game began.

Then a hush pervaded the Casino, so that scarcely anything could be heard, except the clip of the pasteboards.

The Don, for a man of dark complexion, was very pale, and exceedingly nervous, showing that from the first, evidently, he had felt it in his bones that he was to be beaten.

Marie's face being covered, no one could determine whether she was affected or not, but, judging by her deliberate and easy playing, the impression conveyed was that she was perfectly confident of winning.

And she did.

By exactly the same hand that had won her the first game did she win the second, while thunders of applause made the room echo and re-echo.

Don Ramon arose from the table with a vicious oath, as Flanders handed over the immense stakes to Marie, and made his way out of the saloon—no longer rich nor powerful, but literally a pauper, as compared with his former prestige and means.

Straight to his own mansion he took himself, his dusky visage a scene of many evil thoughts and passionate expressions.

"I am ruined! I am ruined!" he muttered, as he ran up the steps; "but it shall not be long. Oh, no!"

Entering the mansion, he sought out the Senorita Inez, and found both her and the rascal Carlos in the parlor, neither of them apparently in a very favorable frame of mind.

Black Carlos, however, no matter how much angered, was not a thundercloud, but instead, more of a cynical villain.

"Been over to see the elephant, eh?" he queried, as he noted the savage expression upon the Don's features.

"Rather to see the lioness!" was the gruff reply.

"Which means that you have felt her teeth, eh?" Carlos laughed.

"Curses on me, yes. I went from this house a rich man, and come back a pauper. The infernal she-sharp literally chawed me up—skinned me of all I am worth!"

"Phew! not all!" Carlos demanded.

"Ay, of every dollar. I am ruined as sure as I am a live man."

"The deuce you say! How about my claim? You are indebted to me over two thousand dollars, you will please remember."

"It matters not. I have not a cent in the world, and can pay no debts."

Carlos scowled: "Supposing you were well heeled, and desiring to have a home of my own, I have just been talking love to the fair Inez, but she repulsed me at every word. Had she accepted me, your debt to me would be canceled. But under the circumstances, something must be done, and done at once, too."

"Bah! you are a fool. My child could never accept a man of your stamp—neither can I pay you."

"We shall have to see about that. You probably know I can put the Judge's noose about your neck, if I so choose?"

"You can not!"

"I can! All the men of the secret league are under my thumb, and, you may rest assured, will not go back on me. Indeed, I can prove by them that you are guilty of all these murders that have been going on lately!"

"And you would do this?"

"Certainly, if you do not come to time. Inez must marry me, and I must be paid the two thousand dollars that are due me, or up to a limb you go!"

"I will die before I will marry you!" Inez declared, her eyes flashing. "I shall marry one man only."

"And that man living somewhere in your custody, would not deign to wipe his feet on you!" Carlos declared, with mocking triumph. "However, you are the priceless jewel I covet, and mine you shall be, or I'll lay you in your grave with my own hands."

"Blatant bombast!" the Don growled. "You dare do nothing."

"Wait and see!" Carlos warned, rising. "I

will give you forty-eight hours to accede to my terms. If you refuse, I'll not only make it exceedingly warm for you, but I will also make five thousand dollars reward by exposing the whereabouts of a certain advertised for person."

"You are talking nonsense," Ramirz averred. "Although it is not impossible that we may come to terms, I am perfectly satisfied that you cannot locate the man you refer to."

"Well, that remains to be told!" Carlos retorted, taking his hat and leaving the room.

After he was gone, Don Ramirz and his daughter stood gazing at each other, until Carlos was heard to leave the house; then the Don said:

"It is as I expected. Matters are approaching a crisis. If some move is not made at once, we are not only irretrievably ruined, but will never escape from this town. What shall be done?"

Inez was silent for a few minutes, then answered:

"You say Mlle. Marie has got all!"

"Everything—all; money and mortgage. Nothing remains belonging to us but this house."

"And you say she offers a reward for Sierra Sam?"

"Yes, of \$5,000 dollars!"

"And has all this money about her?"

"She did a short time ago."

"Then wait!"

She sat down at a table, and hastily wrote the following:

"MILLE. MARIE:—You offer five thousand dollars reward to any person who will deliver Sierra Sam into your charge. If you will meet me at the Curve a mile below town, I will give you the key that will unlock the dungeon that holds him. Bring the money.

CHAPTER XIV.

BAFFLED.

"THERE!" the senorita said, reading it aloud to her father. "See that this paper reaches the woman, Marie, at once, before the Casino closes for the night. She will then, likely, come to the appointed place of meeting, with all her money with her. We will be there in disguise. While you engage her in conversation, I will steal up behind her, throw my arms about her and thus hold her until you can bind her. Then we will rob her at leisure, and also see what face is concealed behind that veil."

"Your plan is excellent," the Don cried, enthusiastically. "I did not know you were so courageous and capable. We should feel flat, however, if she should not have her money with her."

"Well, in that case, we shall have to apply a remedy befitting her. Her money we must have—then I think the sooner we leave here, the better."

"You are right again. But do you not believe we can get some money out of Sierra Sam?"

"No. He remains as stubborn and obstinate as a mule. He says he will die where he is before he will yield."

"Well, we will see after we get ready to leave. Perhaps he will come to terms then. If not, we can do no more than let him go. Carlos may give us trouble unless we accede to his terms."

"Bah! he will do nothing, I believe. If he does, all that is necessary is to give him a dose of arsenic in a glass of wine. That will quiet him effectually. As to his knowing the whereabouts of Sierra Sam, that is all fudge."

"Probably. Well, I will go, now, and see that Mlle. Marie receives this note immediately."

That evening's sport was not all over.

After Ramirz had left the saloon, Marie became even more a center of attraction than before, but she caught no other customer, for exceedingly shy were the habitues of the Casino, of a woman who had such phenomenal luck.

Late in the evening, the stage arrived, and the driver reported that the conveyance had been stopped, scarcely a mile from town, and both the treasure-box and the passengers robbed of everything of value, and one man, who had attempted resistance, had been hauled off the coach and shot.

This created a new excitement, and the Sierra Sam subject received plenty of discussion on every hand.

"I tell you what!" Joe Flanders cried, mounting the bar; "this thing must be stopped. We are fools to calmly submit to being robbed by a

pack of mountain roughs, who cloak their crime under the pretense of avenging the possible death of their former pal, Sierra Sam. Some of you don't believe the cuss is dead, at all, and I am not positive, myself. Therefore, I propose that it is no more than fair that an investigation be made, to learn who is who, here in Rough Ranch. There's one or more suspicious characters about town, who might be able to inform us if Sierra Sam is alive or not."

During this speech, a man entered and handed Marie a letter, which she read and pocketed.

When Flanders finished, she arose, quickly, a shining revolver in her hand.

"If you mean me, sir!" she cried, "in your reference to suspicious persons, I have to inform you that you will not profit by waging war against me. I am prepared to defend myself."

"So I perceive!" Flanders responded, "but I trust you will kindly remove the mask and show us your face."

"Then you trust in vain, for I will not show it at all!" Marie cried, defiantly. "I came here to mind my own business, and the first one who attempts to mind it for me, will have cause to regret it!"

So candidly did she speak that there could be no doubt about her sincerity, and the crowd stood gazing at her in respect and wonder.

Joe Flanders did not feel proud at this, and he sprung down off the counter toward her.

If he contemplated tearing the veil from her face, as was evident, he was not destined to be successful, for just then there was a yell of rage, and Bandel, the madman, darted between them, and dealt Flanders a terrible blow in the face that dropped him.

Then, without uttering a word, away dashed the strange protector again from the saloon.

Flanders was but stunned by the blow, and slowly picked himself up and rubbed his nose dolefully.

"Know better than to attempt to attack a lady next time, perhaps!" Marie suggested.

"Maybe I shall!" Joe growled, going behind the bar and taking a drink at his own expense.

No one else offering her any further molestation, Marie left the saloon.

Once outside she hurried up the gulch toward what was known as the Devil's Curve.

Her rapid footsteps soon brought her to the place, which was the one appointed in Inez's letter.

It was a lonely spot, where the gulch took a sudden curve between two frowning hills, upon which tall gaunt pines were dotted like grim specters.

"Ah! this is a fit place for a murder to be done!" she muttered, as she paused to wait, a revolver partly concealed in her hand. "I wonder how long I will have to wait?"

Not long—for she presently heard footsteps approaching, and soon after a man made his appearance around the curve.

As soon as he came near enough to be discernible, Marie perceived that he was wrapped in a long rubber coat and cap combined, and the cowl of the latter being pulled down over his face, hid it from view.

When he was within a few paces of her, Marie raised her hand, and motioned him not to advance further.

"Stop!" she cried. "I prefer that you remain at a proper distance. Are you Y. Z. &?"

"I am!" the man replied, in a gruff voice, evidently disguised. "Have you come to deal with me, for the release of Sierra Sam?"

"I have, when you prove to my satisfaction that Sierra Sam is alive and in your power."

"I suppose you'd like to have me bring him out where you can see him, eh?"

"Precisely! I will pay, when I get that which I pay for. If you want the money, produce Sierra Sam!"

"I am more cautious than that. Give me the money, and I pledge my word of honor, to turn Sierra Sam over into your keeping, within the hour."

"If you think me green in treating with men of your stamp, Don Ramon, you are doomed to disappointment," she said. "Only when you produce Sierra Sam alive and well will I pay you your price."

Ramirz (for as the reader is aware it was he uttered an oath).

"You are very careful. Have you the money with you?"

"I'd be a fool to bring it here," Marie replied, "where I could easily be robbed of it. When you produce the prisoner, however, the money is ready for you."

"Bah! this is monotonous!" Ramirz declared. "You have all the money and the mortgage

you robbed me of about your person. Deliver it up, or I will leave your corpse for the wolves to pick to-night."

"I am not at all alarmed," Marie retorted. "I have a revolver bearing on your heart, as you doubtless know, and if you make a move toward harming me, you are a dead man!"

But at this instant she was seized from behind.

CHAPTER XV.

UNSUCCESSFUL.

The person who had seized Marie from behind had thrown a strong pair of arms around her, thus pinioning her own arms firmly.

The Don at the same time sprung forward to aid in securing the prisoner, but before he could lay a hand upon the vailed mademoiselle, a pistol-shot rang out, and one of his arms dropped limp and useless to his side.

An instant later Sally Slick dashed forward, a pair of cocked six-shooters in her grasp.

"Let up there, you robbers!" she cried, firing again and sending a bullet so close to the disguised Don's ear, that he jumped violently aside.

"Release that lady, or I will make you so sick of yer little job that yer won't never live to tackle another."

The person who held Marie, and who, the reader is probably aware, was Senorita Inez, in male attire, at once obeyed the command and hastened to the Don's side, while the weapons of Sally Slick still kept a bearing upon them.

"Curses on you!" the Don vociferated, savagely, "put up those weapons, you little fool. You might shoot some one!"

"Yes, you bet I might, and I've half a notion to salivate you, as it is. You're a fine parcel of rascality, now, ain't you?"

"If you don't clear out I'll show you!" the Don warned, savagely.

"Don't be too sure about that!" Marie cried, fiercely. "Your scheme has failed, and you had better take advantage of the chance and clear out while you can. I suspected your game, and came prepared, as I have my money where you could never find it. I'll give you ten days to produce and deliver up Sierra Sam; if you fail, we will see what can be done with you."

Then, without another word, she turned and hastened down the gulch toward the camp.

When she was gone the Don and his daughter turned to where Sally had stood a minute before, but she too was gone.

"Baffled! ruined!" Ramirz hissed. "We, too, may as well go home."

Inez sneered.

"You are an old fool!" she said. "If you had had plenty of help here, no one would have interfered. Now you can go home without your money, and ten to one you'll never get another chance to secure it."

"Well, we won't give up, yet!" the Don replied, sullenly. "We will pay a visit to Sierra Sam, and talk with him."

Still later, that night, Rough Ranch was awakened from its slumber by a wild weird chorus of song, with an accompaniment made by the clatter of horse's hoofs.

Those who ventured to thrust their heads from windows to learn the cause, saw a small party of masked horsemen dashing down through the main street of the town, and knew that they were Sierra Sam's Seven, for seven there were in the party, the person in the lead being none other than the child-bravo, Sally Slick.

So quickly did the party dash through and out of the town, that no one thought of giving pursuit, until they were gone.

The next morning brought to light another annoying discovery.

During the night, five business places in the town had been entered, and money and other valuables taken therefrom; while in each place a visiting card, in the shape of a full sheet poster, had been left, on which was written:

SIERRA SAM'S SEVEN.

Hence, it was no wonder that the people of Rough Ranch fairly howled in their indignation.

One man, a grocer, of German descent, had been robbed of nearly all his stock.

A clothing dealer had been relieved of many of his suits, also, and hardly had enough left to supply a day's demand.

And so once more became agitated the all-important question that had so often been asked before: What was to be done?

With an oath to the effect that he would soon settle matters Joe Flanders picked out four

trustworthy miners, and they held a private consultation.

"It's a matter of no further doubt in my mind but what these accursed outlaws have a go-between in this very camp!" he said, "and who more likely than the vailed woman, Marie? She, perhaps, is also the lost bride of Sierra Sam?"

"Well?"

"In that case, she must tell what she knows, or we'll make her, that's all!"

"But how you going to get at her? She is hard to reach, as you've cause to know."

"Yes, so I am aware, but we must put our heads together and devise a plan, whereby to effect her capture. Then, if she does not come to time she shall be killed, thus ridding the community of one curse at least, if not more."

The plotters thereupon did put their heads together, and secretly arranged a campaign against Mlle. Marie, which boded her no good, should she fall into their trap.

But, with her usual independence, she was to be found at her table in the Casino, at the usual hour in the morning, ready to play with any one who had anything to risk on cards.

During the forenoon after the late robbery, Black Carlos dropped into the saloon and engaged her in conversation.

To his surprise he found her quite amiable and talkative, and he soon found himself very much interested in her, a fact of which she was well aware, as she redoubled her efforts to please.

Gradually their conversation turned to the subject of the doubt existing as to whether Sierra Sam was dead or not.

"I see you have been offering a reward for Sierra Sam," the Spaniard said. "Do you suppose he is alive?"

"Most assuredly. You know he is, too, sir."

"No, I do not know. I merely infer it."

"You do know!" Marie persisted, with a great deal of spirit. "You know as well as I that Sierra Sam is alive and in the power of Ramirz."

"Well?"

"You can earn the reward by revealing the hiding-place of Sierra Sam and delivering him to me. Why don't you do so?"

"Perhaps I might be there sufficient inducement. I believe it would not take me long to ferret out the place where Sierra Sam is confined, if so be he is still alive."

"Pray what inducement could you ask further than what I have offered already?"

"Humph! the money is not sufficient to tempt me, for one thing. If Sierra Sam is worth a cent to you, he is worth a good deal more than the reward you offer. I fancy I know who you are and why you want the bold sport. You are the lost bride, Stella Slocum!"

Marie laughed sarcastically.

"You would not make a fortune at guessing, or you'd know better than that. If Sierra Sam's wife I should not be apt to hide my face. Who or what I am does not in the least concern you or any one but myself. I am willing to pay the sum of five thousand dollars to any one who will set Sierra Sam at liberty, outside the town, but not one cent more. That is a big sum of money to pay, and only strong motives could cause me to give away so much."

"Then I don't believe we can make terms. Twenty thousand would be my very lowest figure, and then I should want you to marry me, and give me control of your affairs."

Mlle. Marie fairly gasped with amazement at the preposterous proposition. Then she laughed sardonically.

"Why you have no end of assurance!" she averred. "I forgive you, however. Were I in the matrimonial market you would be the last person I could imagine as the object of my choice. Your price, too, is most unreasonable, and I could not dream of paying it."

"Sad am I to declare that I cannot exert myself in your behalf," the villain sneered, arising from the table and taking his departure.

"Better so, perhaps," Marie murmured.

Later that day Joe Flanders met the Senorita Inez upon the street, and hailed her.

She waited for him to approach, in considerable surprise, for he had never paid much attention to her, rarely ever speaking to her.

"Excuse me, senorita," he said, doffing his hat with a gallantry not usual with him, "but I have something of importance to say to you."

"Well, say it!" the lady responded, coldly, "but please be as brief as possible as I am in a hurry."

"Well, it is this. That woman Mlle. Maria,

who gambles over at my place, has been telling some pretty hard stories about you, and if I were you I wouldn't stand it. We'd some of us remonstrate with her, but are afraid to touch her until we find out who she really is. That's what we most desire to do, and if we find, as we suspect, that she is Sierra Sam's wife, she's got to surrender, or we will shoot her on the spot!"

"Well, what has this to do with me? What do you want of me?"

"Simply this: Go over to the Casino, enter it, and approach Marie on the sly. When within reach of her, spring forward and tear the veil from her face. I and a dozen others will be near at hand, and be ready to quickly cover her with weapons, so that she will either have to surrender or die!"

"And what am I to get for this?" the Don's daughter demanded, her eyes glittering.

"Why, the satisfaction of triumphing over your enemy, of course."

"Humph! I will not be made a tool of for nothing. If you choose to restore to me the money that she robbed from my father, it will be more of an object."

"I will do this," Flanders asserted. "I will restore to you whatever amount is found on her person at the time she is captured. If this is satisfactory, why go ahead."

"Very well; I will do as you say within half an hour. Be ready, so that there shall be no failure."

Promptly at the appointed time Inez de Ramirz entered the Casino and stole stealthily up behind Mlle. Marie, who was deeply engrossed in a game of poker with a miner.

When sufficiently close the señorita reached quickly forward and tore the covering from the mademoiselle's face, while at the same instant Flanders and a dozen others leaped forward and leveled their weapons almost into Marie's face.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAM'S DECISION.

A FEW hours before Inez tore the veil from the face of Mademoiselle Marie, Ferro delivered the Don an envelope as the latter sat in the parlor of his mansion, engaged in seeking solace from a long-stemmed Turkish pipe.

After Ferro was gone he tore open the message and read:

"Ramon de Ramirz:

"Sir—You are hereby notified that the members of Sierra Sam's Seven have firmly decided, by careful observation, that Sierra Sam still lives, and that he also is in your custody. Therefore, this is to inform you that we have placed the seal of doom upon your head, which nothing can lift therefrom except your surrender and that of our captain. Attempt not to leave the town, as every avenue of escape is guarded with trusty men. Envoys of ours haunt you at your every move. Until to-morrow at midnight will you be given to set Sierra Sam at liberty, outside of Rough Ranch; if you fail to do so, you will not live to see the following morning. Fair warning—last time—take heed!"

"SIERRA SAM'S SEVEN."

The Don read this over, his features growing dark and hard in their expression.

"Curse them," he growled, savagely. "They mean to hound me down to a dog's death, yet, it would seem. But, they shall find me game to the last! If they ever capture me, they shall have to work for it or my name is not Ramirz. I will at once pay a visit to Sierra Sam, whom we so cleverly extracted from the jail, and replaced with a headless cadaver. Ha! ha! the thing worked well, at first, but finally certain suspicious ones began to smell the rat. If I can get a reasonable sum of money from the Sport, we will leave this place behind—Inez and I—and try for better luck in some strange place."

Leaving the parlor, he entered a sort of anteroom, where he procured and lighted a lantern, and also donned a pair of handsome revolvers.

Opening a trap in the floor of this ante-room, he then descended a flight of stone steps, into a dark cellar, where boxes and barrels were stored.

Passing along to the further end, he hung the lantern upon a nail in one of the stringers, overhead, and began to remove a pile of boxes that choked up the rear end of the apartment.

When this job was accomplished, a grated door in the rear wall, was discovered.

Repossessing himself of the lantern, the Don approached the door, unlocked it and entered, at the same time drawing a revolver, and flashing the light around the cell.

Then it became apparent that there was no use of taking the precaution of drawing the weapon, for the prisoner within that gloomy

dungeon was helpless, being chained to the wall, and his hands and feet securely bound.

Sierra Sam it was, alive and looking well, who sat upon a box, as the Don entered, and who looked defiant enough to have repulsed any one.

Ramirz chuckled triumphantly, as he perceived that his captive was all right.

Sam heard the laugh, and his eyes glittered, with set resolve.

"Well, what brings you here again?" he demanded. "I have nothing to say to you."

"But I have to you," the Don declared, with a taunting smile. "I have come to inform you that our pleasant business arrangements must be brought to a close, at once."

"Indeed! well, proceed to say what you desire to. You remember I have emphatically refused to come to any terms whatever."

"But I guess you will now see the necessity of changing your mind, when you learn that I have been ordered to immediately quit the town forever. Before I go, you must come to terms, or you will be left here to die and decay at your leisure."

"Oh! well, I'll take my chances on that," Sam responded.

"Probably presuming that after my departure the house will be searched and your prison discovered. But I will look out for that. Before leaving, I will wall up the entrance to this dungeon, so that no one will ever dream that such a place existed. Thus you will be buried alive, for all time and eternity, and sooner or later die the horrible death of starvation! How fancy that prospectus?"

Sam gave vent to a whistle, and was then silent for a moment.

"In such a case, I reckon you would have the grip on me!" he admitted. "But I hardly believe that you are capable of such a damnable act, despite the fact that I know you are a consummate rascal."

"Well, all you have to do is to try me and see!" the Don said, with a vindictive look.

"You'll find that I mean business this time."

"What terms do you propose to demand, since you have got matters down so fine?"

"Just what I should consider my life worth to me, were it at stake. I know you have money in plenty, while I have been robbed of everything I have. So I'll let up light on you. Pay me fifty thousand dollars and I will release you and furnish you with a disguise, in which to escape from the town."

"You are so considerate and generous that you almost make me cry!" was Sam's sarcastic rejoinder. "Had I a thousand bank accounts, I would not accede to your terms. So go ahead and wall me in. Not one continental cent will I give you."

The Don looked puzzled.

"You are a strange man!" he said. "You must value life very lightly."

"So lightly that I wouldn't pull a hair out of my head to gratify you!" the Sport cried, fiercely. "Get out of my presence, and do your worst, curse you. My spirit will rise from this tomb and haunt you, mark me!"

"Bah! I am not superstitious. As you have made your bed so shall you lie in it. If for gold you would die, then no sin be on my hands. So prepare for your dark watch!"

With a diabolical laugh he turned, left the cell, and locked the door.

In one corner of the cellar was a pile of stone, left there, probably, when the mansion was built.

The bottom of the cellar being of sandy formation, all the Don had to do was to procure a few buckets of water from above stairs, when he was enabled to make a passable bed of mortar.

Setting to work, then, he commenced walling up the entrance to the dungeon, Sierra Sam watching the operation with glittering eyes, but saying nothing.

Three hours of rapid, laborious effort succeeded in accomplishing the job, and Sierra Sam was literally entombed, while the Don, with a grin of demoniac satisfaction, ascended into the mansion and closed down the trap.

"Let him enjoy the fate he has brought upon himself!" he muttered, vengefully. "If I have to leave Rough Ranch in poverty, that infernal pest shall never have a chance to take my trail and hound me down."

Of course Mlle. Marie—otherwise Stella Slocum, for she it was—saw that the game was up the instant she was covered by the aim of so many weapons, and wisely made no effort to defend herself, although flushed with indignation at the cowardly assault.

"Oho! so we've got you, have we, my fair mademoiselle?" Joe Flanders cried, exultantly. "I reckon you'll allow we were one peg too smart fer ye this trip!"

"You had to employ a snake to do the brave act," Stella retorted. "That young woman is the viper who chloroformed me on the night of my arrival in Rough Ranch, and confined me until a few days since in a cavern!"

"It's a base lie!" the señorita declared, redening.

"It is not, and I have proof of it in the person of my rescuer, Bandel, the madman!" retorted Stella.

"Drop this matter just now!" Flanders ordered, importantly. "We have graver m'ters to attend to. Madam, I presume you will no longer deny that you are the wife of the outlaw, Sierra Sam."

"I shall do as I please about that. Besides, Sam is not an outlaw. He is a detective, and an officer of the law!"

"Can't help that. He's a robber, and he's got to pay the premium. You being his wife, are just as liable as he is himself. So, he not bein' here, you've got to tell us where to find him, and the rest of his crew, or you are a corpse, forthwith. We ain't goin' to have no foolin' about this matter; so if you don't want to get put up as a target and be shot into a sieve, spit out all you know lively."

"I know nothing about the whereabouts of my husband, more than that I believe him to be in the power of the Ramirz tribe!" Stella cried, promptly. "It was to find him I assumed my disguise. Of his followers, whoever they be, I know positively nothing."

"That won't work, ma'am. Our eyes won't close worth a cent, you know, and ye ain't got no course to pursue except jest what I've told ye—spit out the truth, the hull truth, and nothin' but the truth, you bet!"

"I see that it is useless to contend with you," Stella returned, calmly. "So having nothing more to say, I will say nothing."

"Then, you'll die!" Flanders cried, savagely.

"Boys, seize her, bind her, and search her!"

The order was promptly obeyed, and Stella was soon bound hand and foot.

Her pockets were then searched, discovering only a pocket-book containing two bits, which Flanders handed over to Inez.

"Bah!" she said throwing it upon the ground. I want my father's money!"

"It's where you could never find it!" Stella assured. "So if you came here to make a fortune, you had better trot home like a whipped puppy!"

"Out onto the street with the prisoner!" cried Flanders, "and bind her to the old horse-chestnut tree. I'll then draw votes with any six galoots in the town to see who shall take a rifle and shoot her, till she is dead. Ef we can't have regular law and order here in Rough Ranch, we will have something to fill its place!"

Poor Stella was then seized and borne out into the street, with loud cries of triumph.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

SIERRA SAM was not an utterly reckless man, although he might have appeared in that light, in refusing to pay over the sum of money demanded for his life's sake; but when he refused Ramirz's demand, he was well assured that it would not be long ere he would be released, whether he was walled in or not.

That assurance came to him thus:

While Ramirz stood within the door speaking, Sam saw a petite figure slyly step to the door, peer through the gratings, and then as noiselessly disappear.

He immediately recognized her as his child pard, Sally Slick, alias Little Luck, and felt confident that it was as good as certainty that his escape was impending.

Nor was he doubtful, when he found himself walled in the dungeon, with not a ray of light at his command.

With great patience he waited.

An hour passed by!

Then he saw the stones begin to move from the top of the door.

In ten minutes a sufficient number had been removed to admit of a voice speaking through the grates from the outside.

"Say, pard, aire ye thar?"

"You bet I am here!" Sam responded. "Is that you, Sally?"

"You bet it is, pard! Just hold your horse, and I'll have you resurrected afore ye know it."

A silence then followed, except the noise made by Sally as she tore down the wall.

In much less time than it took to lay it, was it leveled to the ground, and the gate was exposed.

"So far, so good!" Sally said, pausing to survey her work. "Now then for the lock."

It was a common affair, and producing a bunch of keys she soon had it fitted, and the door unlocked.

After that, it was a comparatively small job to release Sierra Sam.

When he was freed, he caught Sally up in his arms and kissed her, after which he said:

"Come! follow me, now, and I will show you how to get out of this house, and out of the town. Don't fret about Stella. She is at liberty and will join us, as soon as she knows that I have found you."

"Lead on, brave girl! I only want the chance to turn my face from this town, with my brave ones with me," he said, in a tone of gladness.

Ten minutes later they stood in the rear yard, adjoining the Ramirz mansion, mounted upon two of the best horses in the Don's stable, while at the gate stood Ferro, the Don's servant.

"No thanks are required," he said. "I am not a brute nor a villain, and knowing Ramirz and the Senorita Inez to be guilty of many crimes, I am glad to assist in your escape. But look! they are dragging a woman from the Casino! Ah! it is Mariel!"

"Stella! Stella!" screamed Sally. "For God's sake, quick, open the gates!"

Open went the gates, and out and down the street dashed Sierra Sam and Sally, furiously firing with their revolvers as they went!

Fiercely through the crowd Sam led on, and bending in his saddle tore Stella from the arms of her captors.

Then away and on they swept, followed by a few harmless bullets, and the town was left behind!

Sierra Sam, nor Sierra Sam's Seven, were ever heard of thereafter, in the vicinity of Rough Ranch.

Up in a lone mountain valley, he shortly after struck a paying 'lead,' and he, Stella and Sally there settled down, thankful for peace and quiet. And Bandel, the maniac, was there with them, but perfectly harmless.

The Don Ramirz soon after got into dispute with Black Carlos. A duel was the result and both received wounds that used them up.

The senorita drifted away from Rough Ranch, into other parts, and among the few who yet try to "keep order" in the hard little mountain town, Joe Flanders may be classed as ahead!

THE END.

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